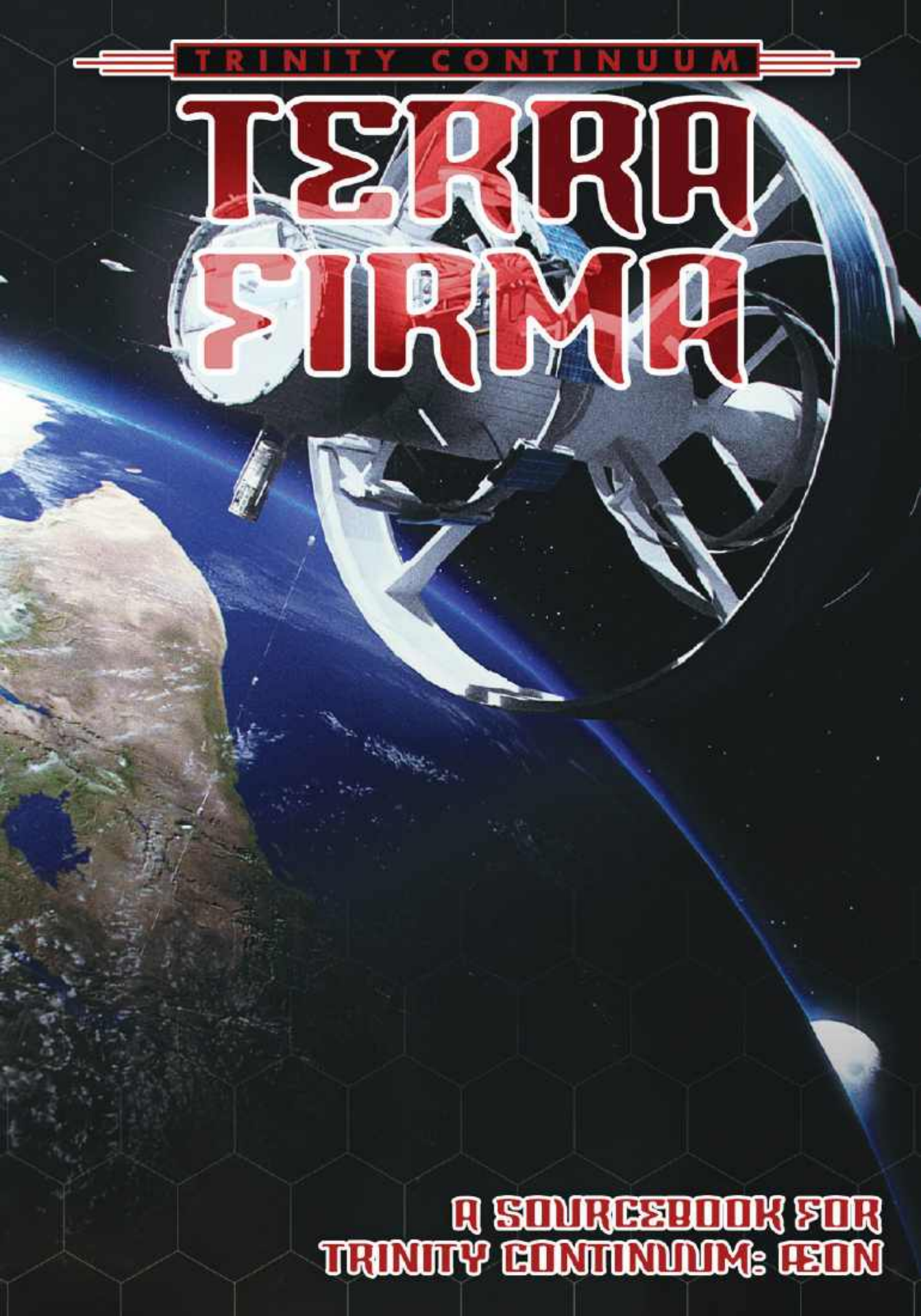
TRINITY CONTINUUM

TERRA FIRMA



A SOURCEBOOK FOR TRINITY CONTINUUM: ÆON

TRINITY CONTINUUM

TERRA FIRMA

KRISTOPHER ALLEN, CLAYTON OLIVER,
CHRIS SHAFFER, LEATH SHEALES,
MONICA SPECA, JOHN HERON SNEAD,
VERA VARTANIAN

CREDITS

Writers: Christopher Allen, Clayton Oliver, Chris Shaffer, Leath Sheales, Monica Speca, John Heron Snead, Vera Vartanian

Developer: John Heron Snead

Trinity Continuum Content Lead: Ian A. A. Watson

Editor: Heather Rigby

Artists: Sam Denmark, Sam White, Felipe Gaona, Michele Giorgi, Shen Fei, John Reed

Art Director: Michael Chaney

Book Design: Josh Kubat

Creative Director: Richard Thomas

Storypath System by: Rose Bailey, David Brookshaw, Meghan Fitzgerald, Danielle Lauzon, Matt Miller, Neall Raemonn Price, Lauren Roy, Malcolm Sheppard, Stew Wilson

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POTENTIALITY

In my mind's eye I see an impossible jewel — blue, green, brown, and white — secured on a delicate band that's invisible to the eye but stronger than the hardest tungsten. The jewel's facets sparkle and shimmer in reflected light, while an everlasting halo of tiny sparkles spins around the centerpiece. I see Earth. Home. The birthplace of humanity; the birthplace of so many of us.

This time, like so many times before and to come, one specific tiny light has my attention. Somewhat larger than many others, it shines in duality — half bursting with psionically vibrant life ignorant of what is to come, the other half fizzing with radioactively excited particles shedding energies with abandon. Not for the first time, I feel waves of emotion for what will soon end and what ended long ago.

I focus on the light, the feel of its potential, the ghosts of so many tantalizing, intersecting possibilities, though I know the waveforms have already collapsed. The path is set, and the options merely tease and torment me with what might have been.

The ephemeral light resolves to the solidity of metal, glass, and plastic. Graceful wings spread from the body of this great bird, collecting Sol's rays while flying against the night sky, ever watchful of the jewel turning silently beneath it. As I move through the structure, I feel the gossamer threads of thousands of connections weaving a complex tapestry between the people, the structure, and Earth. Some strands drift away into the darkness, linking to the worlds beyond — like Luna and a few even further than the human mind can easily grasp.

The Esperanza is filled with the hopes and dreams of so many, but I know its potentiality leads nowhere but severed emptiness. I know what approaches. In this moment, the Esperanza is the human condition — happiness, sadness, love, and hate. The boredom of workers, for whom this has all become normal, serves as the excitement for visitors for whom this is all so new. My mind wanders for a moment as I marvel at the moment when existing beyond our life-giving cradle became commonplace enough to evoke boredom.

A twisting, gnawing emptiness in my stomach brings me back to the present — actually, the past. I feel them before they appear, like an afterthought occurring ahead of time. A forethought. A tremendous sense of wrongness rushing towards me like sharks rising from the deep. Predatory and hungry, encompassing everything wrong with the universe.

Voids of anti-existence open against the vacuum around me. I struggle to count them as how can I accurately assess absolute-nothing against a background of apparent nothing? I know the answer is somewhere in the dozens — I learned this from OpNet logs and vid accounts I view later — but here and then with my own senses I can only tell that it's more than none and less than infinite.

They appear as they have so many times before, like they can never not appear. My stomach twists further as they emerge. Where the Earth is a jewel, these are oil-stains: rainbow slick and oozing corruption and pestilence. Each monster arrives with a wet, fleshy, ripping sound, like wounds opening under a tarnished, blunt blade. The imagery makes no coherent sense, but incoherence is all we can understand from these monsters. I hear the sound even through the vacuum, another impossibility, like so many aspects of these cursed monsters who play by rules no one else can know.

I feel one that stands apart from the rest, a gnawing hunger within hunger, an ever more malevolent presence within the lesser appetite around it. I know from the vids that this one is — was — called Zeus, though in the moment I forget if it laid claim to the name or if witnesses imposed it because of its actions. I suspect the latter, as the wrath of petty gods with no more intent than to punish and torment humanity suits these creatures. I am aware of my bias but am still unwilling to let it go. I doubt I will ever overcome this.

I sense Zeus' corruptive anti-presence move closer to the Esperanza. I want to cry out or move to assist, but I know I can't; I couldn't, and that I never will. I am frightened by the presence as it leaches at my psi. I am scared I will lose myself within its darkness, and I hate myself as much as I hate it in this moment. I also hate that even if I wasn't terrified, I could do nothing as I wasn't there.

Tendrils of dark power emerge from the void and wrap around the Esperanza, almost lovingly, but I know tenderness has nothing to do with the act. It is possessiveness, a claim to something that doesn't belong to the monster. It is the aggressive

action of an abuser whose victim escaped its control and now enacts hate-fueled revenge by punishing others.

In an instant the Esperanza is no longer in my sight, and I have to adjust focus to follow its trajectory. The entire station, hundreds of thousands of kilograms suddenly accelerated more than 5000 kilometers per hour directly toward Earth. The Aberrant's powers ignore physical considerations like inertia; Esperanza's speed merely changes from one second to the next. Everyone inside should be dead from the acceleration tearing at their bodies, but I know this isn't the case. I can hear them screaming in terror. They barely felt the change, but they can hear the alarms blaring throughout the station and see on the vid monitors their approaching doom as Earth grows ever larger as it rushes towards them — as they rush towards it.

I feel glittering paths of subquantum energy streak out into the void, desperately calling for help that I know never comes. With a brief shift of focus, I see great networks of my peers joined hand in hand trying to reach out across the distance between worlds, hoping that those who might prevent the disaster can hear and respond. I watch them try and know that their efforts won't work, that they didn't work and never will. I see some of my colleagues notice my presence even through their concentration. They glance towards me, know that I observe from a time when all this is history. They know precisely what my being here means, and I watch tears fall down their faces as they continue to try. They know the path is doomed — they also know they must continue to walk along it, otherwise what I represent may never come to pass.

The Esperanza clears the vacuum in just over five minutes and friction begins to work at the hull. Zeus' tendrils still cling to the station, pushing harder against the resistance, ensuring the station accelerates faster than gravity can drag it down. The Esperanza glows with the agonies of friction as it plunges through the atmosphere. The screams within have turned to prayers to whatever gods may hear them, but the only higher power who might answer is the devil Zeus. Their prayers don't go unheard. I listen to them all, stretching the brief few moments into a near eternity as I move along the intense connections of shared mortality. Far from here I know tears streak down my face and my body sobs uncontrollably at the agony I feel for their pain. I reach my limits and don't want to hear any more, but I force myself to continue. It is the least I can do. It's all I can do to ensure the victims' voices are heard.

The Esperanza's wings shred from atmospheric resistance, sheering off as mini fireballs ejected from their fiery mother. The fire will consume these before they reach the ground, they play no further part in the tragedy.

The terror and pain of the thousands of souls shines as the core of this nexus, burning bright as a beacon, blinding even beyond the white fireball of the Esperanza's melting skin. I can't tell at what point the desperation of the people on board the dying station mingles with that of the millions of Parisians below, now realizing the inevitability of their doom as escape from either the impact site or the fallout is an impossibility. Perhaps there is no single moment of absorption; more like two stars so distant and so bright that their light mingles into one.

Before the backlash of psionic shock washes over me when the dead station snuffs out millions of lives, I realize that I am not alone here. I am a solitary, quiet presence in the void but am surrounded by so many others assembled to watch the destruction as it occurs. I am one of a thousand, of a thousand-thousand.

I am not even alone in myself and I can feel my own distinct noetic signature overlapping the dozens or hundreds of times I've forced myself to come and remember why we do what we can. Perhaps each time I return I add to my convergence of self, or maybe the final instance of me has already joined and what I sense is all that I am. I briefly think of following my own resonance but instinctively know that's a fool's errand. All paths lead back to you, as the saying goes. All I could inevitably find at the end of a thread is me, looking back across the mirror.

As the Esperanza dies against Mother Earth, I see that all is not lost from this darkness. I have seen this before, I am seeing it for the first time, I will see it again. This ending that terminates those thousands of threads above and the millions below is not complete. New strands grow, promulgate, and intersect beyond the darkness, strengthened as they emerge with new light and renewed focus. The tragedy ends here for many, but prolonged

despair transforms into hope for millions more. The increased luminosity of potentiality for so many lives after this tragic nexus marks the sorrow as a turning point. Humanity is stronger and more resolved against the darkness — and many more challenges I feel like vague looming dread in the potentiality.

"We did not prevent this," I hear Old Man say, sometime long past when I'm watching. "Perhaps we never could, after a point. Our choices led us to this place, our human prejudices and fears led us to this time, and we didn't see it coming and we couldn't stop it happening." He is here, a vast myriad of him yet just one, watching with us, reliving this more than anyone else with our gift. With our curse.

"We never forget this tragedy," he says in his solemn, quiet voice. He is near but so far away, and I wonder when he is speaking and when I am hearing him. "Though humanity grows stronger from such adversity, we work to avoid the tragedy, to ensure this history never repeats." Old Man speaks with hope, but I hear a tone in his voice, and I wonder what he sees that the rest of us are as yet blind to. "We bear witness and carry this burden to remind ourselves what we face and why we must be strong. We never forget that we failed these people. We must be better than we were, come together in unity and repay them through our vigilance and remembrance. When the next darkness arrives, we must ensure all psions stand ready. We owe nothing less."

INTRODUCTION

"Utopia is the process of making a better world, the name for one path history can take, a dynamic, tumultuous, agonizing process, with no end. Struggle forever."
— Kim Stanley Robinson, Pacific Edge

In 2123, more than 99% of the human population still lives on Earth and more than three-quarters of those who don't live on Luna. All of humanity's large cities are on Earth or Luna, and people on these two worlds create almost all scientific breakthroughs and design and build all of humanity's cutting-edge technologies. Earth remains the center of politics, invention, art, technology, and crime and war. While the vast expanse of the millions of extrasolar worlds beckons, in this era humanity has only taken its first steps beyond Earth — the extrasolar worlds are still very much a remote and sparsely populated frontier. Earth is still humanity's home, and with the development of jump rings, Luna, and particularly Olympus, is swiftly becoming a place that most of Earth's inhabitants treat as a part of Earth. This book, **Terra Firma**, reveals the wonders and secrets found on Earth, Luna, and in their immediate spatial environs.

If you want to run or play in a **Trinity Continuum: Æon** chronicle focusing on intrigue, espionage, politics, diplomacy, or even life on the mean streets of some metropolis or arcology, you want a chronicle set on Earth or Luna, because that's where the action is. However, it's also vitally important to remember that no chronicle is set on Earth *as a whole*. Even the most globe-trotting chronicle is set in a series of individual cities and nations, each of which having between 100,000 and several hundred million inhabitants, and its own distinct culture and history. Earth is a huge and vastly diverse world that is home to billions of people, and many hundreds of cultures and subcultures. The true richness of any chronicle set on Earth or Luna is having the characters interact with some portion of this vast diversity.

Humanity has traveled to the stars! Currently, jump rings, hypersonic jets, and occasionally teleporters permit characters to travel anywhere on Earth or Luna within several hours — perhaps even in several minutes. Yet, national and regional cultures, languages, and, of course, laws remain exceedingly distinct. In any location other than remote rural areas, citizens of and visitors to China can expect to be heavily surveilled. However, in the more rundown cities and arcologies in the FSA or the officially disused and abandoned portions of the vast Nihonjin arcology, there is no surveillance at all. In these regions, emergency services either can't or won't show up unless there's a threat that's sufficiently large and dangerous enough to endanger people living in officially recognized areas.

Laws and customs are different from one nation to another, and sometimes from one city or even one portion of a city to another. One way to make chronicles set on Earth feel powerful and compelling is to focus on these differences as well as the closely related differences of wealth and social class. If you're a spy or agent provocateur sneaking into the FSA to aid rebels or foment revolution, it matters if you're in Chicago or the edge of Wycoff's Blight and it's just as important if you are impersonating a wealthy and privileged full citizen, a lowly second class citizen, or a semi-legal immigrant.

Although **Trinity Continuum: Æon** offers opportunities for play on every continent and on a multitude of worlds, it's important to remember that a single nation, or even one city, can serve as the focus for an entire chronicle. Just because characters can easily transport themselves to any nation on Earth in hours or minutes doesn't mean they need to do so. Storyguides can create exciting and memorable chronicles in a single city, focusing on the issues, problems, opportunities, and threats found there. A city or arcology of several million people offers a vast array of potential scenarios and meeting characters associated with wildly different cultures and subcultures, while also providing a unity of place that can help tie a chronicle together. This unity of place can work on an even smaller scale. A series of two or three neighboring biovillages in the Amazon Rainforest, several independent towns in the Australian outback, or one neighborhood in a city or arcology might have a total population of less than 10,000, but any of these locations could still make excellent settings for several scenarios, or even an entire chronicle.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Terra Firma is a supplement for **Trinity Continuum: Æon** and requires it to use. **Terra Firma** contains detailed descriptions of 10 major cities, from Brasilia to Olympus, and the nations these cities are part of. It also includes detailed information about a variety of current threats, like criminal gangs and dangerous religious cults, as well as many strange and often deadly mysteries that lie hidden, waiting for someone sufficiently foolish, greedy, or perhaps simply unlucky to uncover them. Some of these potentially deadly wonders are relics of the Nova Era and the Aberrant War, but this book also explores both more recent and far older dangers. **Terra Firma** also contains descriptions of both advanced technologies in current use and a few of the surviving relics of the Nova Age.

CHAPTERS

Chapter One: The Nations and Cities of Earth contains a wealth of exciting and useful information on 10 major cities, including nine Earthly cities and the Lunar city of Olympus, along with general material on the nations these cities are located in. When combined with the descriptions in **Trinity Continuum: Æon**, these provide Storyguides with everything they need to set scenarios, or even entire chronicles, in these locations.

Chapter Two: Threats and Dangers describes a series of local and national criminal gangs, terrorist threats, revolutionary movements, and potentially dangerous new religions and social movements. It contains details of eight different gangs and movements, each in a different region of Earth. The organizations detailed here are all at least potentially violent or destabilizing, but not all of them are unsympathetic or in the wrong.

Chapter Three: Earthbound Mysteries describes 13 unusual locations or other oddities on both Earth and Luna. Most were built during the Nova Age or the Aberrant War, but a few are more recent, and one is far older. This chapter contains everything from the bizarre horrors of the ruins of the Kuala Lumpur mechano-hive to a vast and ancient network of Quantum Flux riddled caverns that lurks beneath Eastern Europe.

Chapter Four: Technology and Rules contains new civilian technologies, as well as relics of the Nova Age, and a selection of new Paths and Edges focused on characters from and living on Earth or Luna.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following works are all set on future versions of Earth or Luna and provide inspiration for a variety of Earthly and Lunar settings and scenarios.

FILMS & TELEVISION

Continuum (2012-2015): Although much of the action takes place in the present day, this TV show about time traveling police and terrorists has numerous scenes in the 2070s, which are of a somewhat repressive world with exceedingly advanced technology.

Damnation Alley (1977): Excellent inspiration for *La Blessure* and the monstrosities and predatory gangs that inhabit it.

Dredd (2012): A fun, if somewhat mindless, action film set in a dystopian arcology police state. It also contains wonderful visuals of what life in an arcology would be like.

Minority Report (2002): An action-packed film set in a world with psychic precognition and a wealth of advanced surveillance technologies, which can provide a wealth of useful ideas for running scenarios in most of the more prosperous nations of 2123.

Incorporated (2016-2017): This television show depicts a horrifyingly realistic dystopia where the wealthy live lives of high-tech privilege and the poor struggle to survive. It's an excellent source of inspiration for life in the FSA.

BOOKS

Blue Remembered Earth by Alastair Reynold: A story of ancient mysteries in a high-tech Africa that's focused on space. A must read if you want to better understand the UAN.

Catspaw by Joan D. Vinge: Engaging psions and lethal conspiracies on a high-tech but oligarchic Earth filled with profound inequality.

China Mountain Zhang by Maureen F. McHugh: A story of the lives of wonderfully realized characters

in a world dominated by an authoritarian, but functional, Chinese surveillance state.

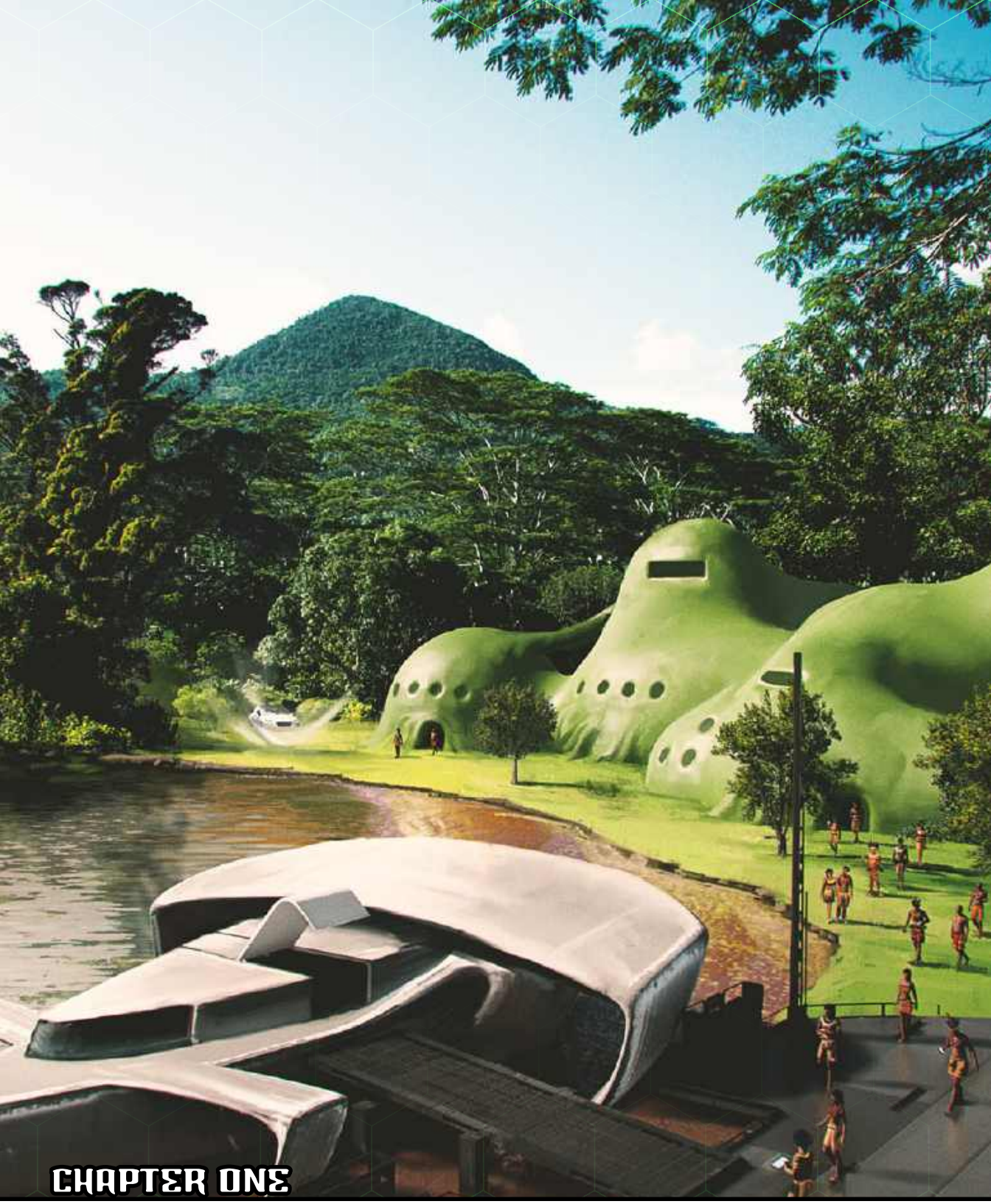
Existence by David Brin: A fascinating story of global conspiracies, economic inequality, and ambiguously positive alien contact on a relatively functional, exceedingly cosmopolitan, high-tech Earth.

Gamechanger by X. L. Beckett: Earth in the early 22nd century is recovering from the devastation of the 21st century, while also facing new threats and dangers. It does a wonderful job of depicting a technologically advanced world still recovering from disaster, while also demonstrating how mysteries and intrigues can still exist in an environment of ubiquitous surveillance.

Growing Up Weightless by John M. Ford: A brilliant and compassionate coming of age novel, set on a large Lunar colony not all that different from Olympus.

Her Silhouette Drawn In Water by Vylar Kaftan: A haunting and brilliant story of a powerful telepath imprisoned by an oppressive government that fears psychics.

New York 2140 by Kim Stanley Robinson: A tale of climate change, inequality, and how life both does and doesn't change with differences in environment and technology.



CHAPTER ONE

THE NATIONS & CITIES OF EARTH

"National boundaries are not evident when we view the Earth from space. Fanatical ethnic or religious or national chauvinisms are a little difficult to maintain when we see our planet as a fragile blue crescent fading to become an inconspicuous point of light against the bastion and citadel of the stars."
— Carl Sagan

Earth is vast and populous; Luna is home to tens of millions. Between these two worlds there are countless opportunities for both heroism and villainy. This chapter focuses on some of the most notable cities and nations. Other locations on Earth and Luna can be equally exciting, but these are some of the easiest locations for scenarios.

AUSTRALIA

Spared the worst horrors of the Aberrant War and subsequent disasters through a perfect confluence of favorable geographic, political, and social winds, Australia has established itself as a bastion of prosperity and stability in a world where both can sometimes be in short supply. Australia opened its borders to refugees from around the world, finding homes for thousands fleeing from Aberrant-fueled disaster in Southeast Asia, orbital-strike catastrophe in ravaged Europe, and political persecution in North America. It has done so with a typically Australian friendliness, mixed with pride at its new-found importance on the world's stage. Australia maintains overtly positive relationships with most of the rest of the world, and even its rivalries progress with an air of offered mateship. Though other countries sometimes covet what Australia has, few are willing to go outside the established norms of international engagement; doing so risks retribution from a force outside Australia's direct control but who proudly call Australia home — the Legions.

HISTORY

Though Australians had no idea at the time, the country's maneuverings in the beginning of the Nova Age in the early years of the 21st century set the foundations for Australia to build upon. The geopolitical forces of the time pulled Australia in opposing directions. As the nation's traditional partners of Britain and the United States mired themselves in populist, isolationist governments and policies, Australia's political leanings began following suit, working to separate the island nation from the realities of the global hemisphere it occupied. Opposed to these changes, the rise of influence and power of China and other Asian nations positioned these countries as Australia's greatest trading partners, with the promise of billions of dollars of revenue flowing into national coffers in exchange for closer partnership.

Financial realities and the increasing isolationism of its traditional allies helped the nation decide its path for the future. Even while sometimes giving the appearance of being a second Britain or a US clone, Australia spent substantial resources positioning itself as both a Pacific nation with shared interests and collaborative goals with Southeast Asia. The friendships had considerable wariness on both sides, but everyone understood the greater benefits of working together rather than apart.

When Aberrants — then called novas — erupted around the world, Australia's low population left it with few of its own and most left to seek the greater fame and fortune that larger and more prominent nations could provide. As nova organizations established their power bases and expanded around the Pacific rim, Australia wasn't a geopolitically attractive location to play home to an Aberrant "superhero" team but was close enough to support Indonesia's claim and to act as valued partner in the region. Both outcomes proved crucial to securing Australia's future.

Most Pacific rim Aberrants settled several hundred kilometers to Australia's north, in Indonesia — close enough to come to Australia when needed, but far enough away to have little interest in their southern neighbor. Australia offered these novas use of its open spaces and military testing facilities for their own testing and training purposes, but most novas in

NEAR SPACE

Earth and Luna both possess large populations, but some people live and work in space stations orbiting Earth, or between Earth and Luna. The two largest and most populous orbital habitats are Abuhisi station, connected to the UAN's space elevator, and Chimborazo station, at the far end of the Ecuadorian space elevator with that same name. Both are home to more than 20,000, and every day many hundreds more travel to or from Earth through these two stations.

Dozens of smaller stations also orbit Earth. Most are either research or manufacturing facilities, or part of the growing number of defense stations that both China and the UAN are building to repel attacks from space. A few critics fear that the Chinese could also turn their defense satellites against Earth, but most people welcome the protection.

Between Earth and Luna, there are also a handful of stations in the L-4 and L-5 Lagrange points. The L-4 point has several research stations, including the largest telescope not on Luna. The L-5 point has only a single inhabited station — the Aphra-Wei Reclamation Base, where a joint venture funded by China and Israel-Palestine works to salvage the two enormous L-5 space habitats destroyed during the Aberrant War. Rumors and urban legends claim that the L-5 point is haunted, a home to numerous Aberrants, or possibly a hiding place for space pirates. Surprisingly, the last claim is actually true. A small pirate ship, fitted with a fast, stealthy, but aging, Nova Era reactionless drive regularly lurks in the L-5 point, waiting to prey upon automated transports traveling between Earth and Luna (for more on space piracy, see p. XX).

this region preferred to live and work in Indonesia, where the national government wholeheartedly embraced the possibilities for technological and economic development they offered. With few superpowered opponents, and little nova-made infrastructure, most power-mad nova ignored Australia when war swept the world.

Before the war began, the money flowing from providing goods, services, and manufacturing capacity to the Aberrants let Australia upgrade its national transport and logistics infrastructure, bringing the nation closer together than ever before. While Australians always saw themselves as part of the greater nation above state or regional interests, the reality of distance between population centers had previously encouraged rivalry and a focus on local needs. This development and improvement of networks across the country would later prove crucial for Australia to play host to successive waves of people fleeing the horrors behind them.

CORPORATE HAVENS

While war raged, Australia continued its transformation and growth, as design and circumstance continued working in the nation's favor. Many US-based corporations had offshoots and regional offices in Australia to better prosecute their corporate interests. As Quantum-fueled devastation repeatedly struck US cities, most companies not directly involved in the war effort shifted more of their decision making and processes to their Australian holdings. After the Wycoff explosion crippled both the American breadbasket and the US economy, even more moved down under. The invasions of Canada and Mexico by the nascent FSA was the final straw for many. They could see the future of subjugation and absorption into FSA structures if they didn't leave immediately and quickly arranged for transfer of corporate control to the Australian networks. For those companies that decided to remain in America, many of their offshore branches declared autonomy, establishing themselves as separate corporate entities, including in Australia. Perhaps the greatest coup in these corporate relocations was the large-scale relocation of mass media giants to Australia's shores, fleeing the burgeoning American repression. The FSA demanded the return of what it saw as its possessions, but it had little legal weight behind the argument as the government hadn't yet amended law to enshrine the FSA symbiosis between corporation and government. It also had little capacity to prosecute a second war halfway around the world with the FSA military entirely occupied with securing the New Mexican and Canadian territories while Aberrants still rampaged across America.

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

After the Aberrant War, Australia emerged with few scars. Its population had increased by over one million from taking in Indonesians and people from Southeast Asian nations as they fled the violence and devastation brought by having the nova stronghold at their doorstep. Although reports suggested that the Aberrants living in the region hadn't instigated the violence, their presence brought other, less friendly, Aberrants to the area hungry for blood.

This refugee population largely settled in the northern areas of Australia and proved vital to the post-war reconstruction efforts. With its resources and infrastructure still largely intact, Australia became the key regional coordinator and provider of humanitarian relief to ravaged nations. Newly settled refugees joined Australian reconstruction efforts, smoothing over cultural and language barriers, and allowing everyone to get to work with minimal disagreement. The wartime reversal of Australia's restrictive immigration laws and the focus on redevelopment of the region (and further development of Australia itself) attracted many other immigrants and refugees to the region, searching for a new home and a brighter future. The populations of the main coastal cities soon boomed, and services struggled to keep up with the influx. In response, the Australian federal government, working in concert with the various state governments, instituted policies to increase development of the continent's vast but less hospitable interior and provided financial and social inducements to encourage segments of the existing population to move out of the capitals and into the bush. For newly arriving immigrants, the government offered little choice but to begin the process of settling in Australia in one of these rural developments.

REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP

The reality of Australia's refugee-based multiculturalism was becoming the new normal in regional relations in the South Pacific. Australia and New Zealand had always been close partners through similar culture, shared British colonialism, and the near freedom of travel between the two nations for their citizens. Now huge sections of the Australian population had a similar connection with other regional nations and wanted an equivalent consideration between their original and adopted homes. Faced with strong interest groups and large, united

voting blocs, the Australian government recognized how the winds blew and opened negotiations with its counterparts in the region.

The Australasian Regional Defense Pact (ARDEP) was the first of many steps along this path. Australia, New Zealand, and Polynesia were the first to come together in this new agreement, quickly followed by Melanesia, Micronesia and Papua New Guinea as the group who would formalize the political conglomerate as the Austronesian Union. Australia invited Indonesia to join the pact (and Union), but it declined in preference for maintaining its own national interests. The destruction from the Aberrant War, mostly taking the form of successive waves of "natural" disasters — Quantum-generated tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and typhoons — had left Indonesia with many hungry and desperate people. Australia and the infant Union provide aid and continue to extend the invitation of membership, but Indonesia's government remains wary of the possibility that a close alliance with Australia could reduce their national sovereignty.

BEYOND EARTH

As the world continued to heal and global relationships settled into their new normal Australia turned its eyes towards the heavens. Managing the changing realities of ARDEP and the Union had kept the country's political and development focus away from the increasing importance of utilizing space resources. By the time Australia did refocus on space it was already considerably behind many other players. While it balked at committing the resources required to build its own space industry — especially with the market already dominated by various African nations, China, and Europe — Australia did what had led to success many times before. It opened its doors and invited others to use what Australia had. The open spaces, relatively stable and predictable weather systems, repurposed missile ranges and tracking stations all played a part in attracting foreign investment to co-develop Australia's space industry. Before long, Australia's outsourced space efforts boomed, with foreign governments and corporations leasing time and resources from Australia's space infrastructure to supplement their own, or in some cases in place of having to find money and space to build their own.

The Sydney Spaceport was the public hub of Australia's space network. While other installations in more remote parts of the country had a more important role to play in the telemetry, testing, and production of various space vehicles, the Spaceport was where the world saw it come together. This sprawling complex brought together the facilities for space cargo and transportation and combined them in one place with air, sea, and land logistics. The Sydney Spaceport — known as SSX — was the first intermodal port for all types of cargo going to any destination, and the Australia-based mass media latched onto this new darling to sell it to the world. Few predicted that these slick campaigns would bring SSX to the attention of enemies thought long-gone from Earth and make it the obvious place to return to the world. Thankfully, those who did predict the Aberrant return were ready and waiting to counterstrike.

RISE OF THE PSIONS

While Australia wasn't prepared for the Aberrant attack on SSX, the nascent psi orders were. Within minutes of the attack's launch, hundreds of psions had entered the fray. Most teleported in from staging areas but others were already present or nearby and made initial contact, distracting the Aberrants who weren't expecting anything but light emergency responder resistance using conventional weaponry. The swift counterattack prevented greater injury and loss of life. No more than 10 people died and fewer than 100 sustained injuries. The psions did more than violently repulse the Aberrant invaders — vitakinetics healed wounded back to full health, quantakinetics repaired damaged equipment or jury-rigged temporary replacements, psychokinetics doused fires and shifted debris, while electrokinetics coaxed and coordinated vehicles into working more efficiently than ever. The competent dedication and unity of the psionic rescuers played perfectly into the first media units to arrive on the scene, as did Alex Cassel's carefully managed address as soon as the attack was over, and the situation was safe.

The gratitude of the nation and groundswell of support for psions from the Australian people prompted the parliament to move quickly in extending friendship and welcome to the newly publicized psi orders. Behind the scenes, the Æon Trinity negotiated with the Australian government to facilitate the incorporation of psions into Australian society. Both Æon and Australia were pleasantly surprised — if a little alarmed — when General Larssen announced her intention to establish the headquarters of her psi order in Sydney itself.

From the General's perspective, Sydney was the perfect location. The resonance between the city and the psions' first public appearance cemented the spirit of aid and strength in the population's mindset. The logistical advantages offered from proximity to the Sydney Spaceport enhanced the Legions' capacity to secure its supply lines. And though Australia had repurposed many historic weapons ranges towards the space industry, the country still had many broad spaces that the Legions could use for training and wargaming. From Australia's perspective, and that of the Austronesian Union, the defensive boost gained by playing home to the powerful Legions enhanced regional security far in excess of the financial considerations General Larssen and the UN sought.

AUSTRALIA TODAY

An abundance of people, employment, and security have made modern Australia one of the wealthiest and most prosperous nations in the world. Such comfort almost inevitably fuels fears that the current prosperity could vanish. Despite the multicultural ubiquity in modern Australian society, the country has begun shifting policy to again tighten new immigrant pathways and has placed considerable pressure on communities to take responsibility for those new arrivals from similar ethnic backgrounds. This in turn generates ill-feeling in those communities towards the government, as even the most welcoming individuals and families believe that authorities are shirking their responsibility, and it is not the role of the individual to fix Australia's societal pressures. The situation is not yet serious, but various officials believe it could easily become so.

SYDNEY

Sydney is the Australian city best known to the rest of the world; few outsiders realize that Canberra, 300 kilometers to Sydney's south, is the nation's capital.

Australia's first city, and its largest, Sydney has long traded on its reputation for beautiful waterways, leafy suburbs, and iconic buildings. These elements are recognizable throughout human space, thanks to the media networks and the entertainment production companies who call Australia — and Sydney — home. A vast amount of media content streams from Sydney's shores onto the OpNet every day. News reporters, paparazzi, celebrity watchers and Legions' fans constantly see elements of Sydney's cityscape as background for whatever story or candid shot they're hoping to take and sell. Many scripted dramas and OpNet thrillers also use Sydney's buildings and streets as their tapestries, even when trying to pretend that their settings are some other city entirely.

THE EVER-POLISHED DIAMOND

According to Sydney's residents — self-described as Sydneysiders — part of Sydney's charm is the feeling that it's constantly under development. Construction sites are common throughout the city, especially in the inner districts, continually demolishing, constructing, redeveloping, or refining the buildings and cityscape. This gives an air of continual improvement to the city, as if it's always striving towards the future and whatever lies ahead. This was especially true after the Aberrant War and the scars it left on the city.

Though largely isolated from the destruction, the violence that did affect Australia almost entirely centered on Sydney and its icons. Aberrants destroyed the Opera House twice during the bulk of the conflict. Historians argue whether the first strike that leveled the building was part of the war or simply collateral damage from Aberrants playing the roles of super-heroes and villains, but no one disagrees that the second impact was a deliberate attempt to bring the war to Australia's shores. Fortunately for Sydney and Australia, a small group of Aberrants with a specific anger towards the Australian government drove the hostilities, unsupported by the other monsters attacking around the globe. Sydney still suffered under the assaults, but the heavy response from the Australian Defense Forces fought back the Aberrants before their destruction could spread too much further.

TANGLED CONGESTION

Sydneysiders may be proud of the continual refreshment of their home, but it costs them in traffic and impaired mobility around the city. This is nothing new to Sydney — from its establishment, the city has always been a haphazard maze of streets with little planning or logic behind them. Sydney is a classic result of pre-urban planning where people built upon any piece of land that seemed large enough to hold the desired construction, regardless of whether it contributed to a unified design or impeded traffic flow. Many cities around the world share this "design," but Sydney's chaos is particularly noticeable as the city is nestled among various harbors and bays, the tangle of waterways that run through the city towards these oceanic outlets.

As technology progressed, this "anything goes" approach extended to other transport technologies, with the bays and rivers constantly busy with aquatic traffic — above and below the surface — and aerial skyways appearing like swarms of insects moving between buildings in a constant search for food or rest. Amongst these private vehicles are the public transport infrastructures, with train lines, ferries, and airbuses moving through and around everything else and contributing to the dizzying display of chaos in motion.

The extent of coordinating and controlling the land, water, and air traffic is such that Sydney invests in hundreds of high-quality satisfactory intelligences (SIs) dedicated to monitoring it all and restricting or opening routes, or redirecting various modes as required. These SIs work alongside human supervisors in Sydney Traffic Control whom they call upon to make decisions on events outside their parameters. Much like the air traffic controllers of old, the burnout rate for the people keeping Sydney's arteries and veins flowing is significantly higher than nearly any other profession in the city.

LAW AND ORDER

New South Wales Police (NSWP) work closely with Sydney Traffic Control but both are separate departments within Sydney's governmental structures, and though driving or piloting offenses are part of NSWP's remit officers usually have larger issues to contend with besides traffic misdemeanors.

Like any large city, particularly those with plenty of wealth and opportunity, Sydney has its share of crime ranging from street-level opportunistic theft and robbery to organized criminal syndicates. Investigation and enforcement of criminal activities in Sydney can quickly become entangled by the different official interests represented in the city.

As Sydney is the capital of the Australian state of New South Wales, the NSWP technically has primacy over policing and investigating any criminal activity in the city. In practice, the overlay of Australian federal and Austronesian Union law, and the significant Legions presence, makes jurisdiction more a case of negotiation and resource sharing. For crimes that expand beyond New South Wales' borders, including anything involving Australia as a whole or the Austronesian Union, the Austronesian Union Police (AUP) take the lead. Though Legions' personnel technically fall under Australian jurisdiction when in the country, NSWP and AUP are often content to pass matters involving Legionnaires to the First Legion's Military Police as the UNMLC has stricter penalties and much less tolerance than Australian law for most infractions.

To support these arrangements, the three law enforcement agencies have permanently established joint units to coordinate and manage the distribution of effort and arrange transfer of primacy from one department to another where potential conflict arises. While good in theory, in practice the joint units are delicate political structures where command staff cultivate favors and quid pro quo as currency and seek to use this capital to gain cases of interest for their organizations while moving the less desirable ones to others. Meanwhile, the rank-and-file members try to work together as best they can, sometimes through genuine friendship and shared purpose, but more often focusing on one-upmanship and friction from relative freedoms, pay scales, and expectations their "partners" enjoy.

WEALTH, FAME, AND INDUSTRY

As a metropolitan city, Sydney's people enjoy access to the wide range of employment opportunities available to the modern 22nd century citizen. The heavy media and entertainment presence, and the celebrities these spawn, provide employment for much of Sydney's population, either directly or in support of the glitz and glamor industry. Media management agencies, financial advice, legal representation, even quality restaurants, cafes, and clubs all feed off the public's desire to sustain the beautiful and powerful people, and to know everything about their movements and activities. Paparazzi and OpNet bloggers can grow rich and famous if they deliver the scoop on whomever the spotlight shines at that moment. This cult of celebrity and the perks and challenges associated with it extends to any publicly known psions, though the tide of public opinion is quick to turn on individuals if they don't live up to the fantasy expectations of millions of people who don't know the real person and never will. In response to this reality, Legionnaires stationed in Sydney — or those moving through who won't spend all their time on a Legions base — must attend awareness and PR briefings to give them some defense against the intrusions they're sure to encounter.

Outside media content, Sydney's other manufacturing industries include the breadth of Australian products. Factories and construction plants in the city's outskirts industrial parks create or construct

nearly everything from food to textiles, heavy machinery to biotechnology, furniture to electronics. The broad manufacturing base takes advantage of the economics of having so many other producers of components or associated products in close proximity, minimizing costs as much as possible. Sydney-based industries also make full advantage of the city's multi-modal transport facilities, moving goods around the nation, the world, and to the stars.

SITES TO SEE

Sydney is home to beautiful natural scenery and architectural constructs which have captured the imaginations of generations of humanity around the world and now across the stars. The ever-producing entertainment industry sets many shows in Sydney, and the media constantly reports on the goings-on of the celebrities of the moment. Almost everyone has at least some understanding of what Sydney has to offer, but most have never experienced it for themselves, or toured these well-known icons outside virtual simulations. Beyond the Opera House and Sydney Harbor Bridge, many visitors to the city take the chance to see the following — psion-associated — buildings for themselves.

The Jar: The Legions Headquarters, affectionately known as the Jar, overlooks Darling Harbor from New Park, a location reclaimed and rebuilt from the wreckage of the Garden Island naval base, Potts Point residential suburb, and Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens after the Aberrant War. While the New South Wales and Australian governments concentrated on rebuilding the Opera House for the psychological boost it would provide the population, the Æon Covenant negotiated a private-public partnership with Sydney's administrators to fund and redevelop these areas that were also victim to Aberrant attacks. After the reveal of psions, and the negotiated agreements between Australia and the Legions to headquarter the psi order in Sydney, historians and conspiracy theorists have produced countless hours of OpNet material examining the timing, the design, and the eventual purpose of the parkland and mini-arcology.

The mini-arcology occupies prime real estate less than two kilometers from the Opera House and only a few kilometers east of central Sydney. While the 130-story edifice looks nothing like the location did before, its design somehow harmonizes with the Sydney city skyline and pays respectful homage to the locations that preceded it.

The publicly accessible museum levels appear to seamlessly connect human engineering with natural beauty as the tiered layers extend on opposite sides towards the interstellar arboretum and Garden Island, both with their ground-level stand-alone memorials and open-air displays. These invite people to contemplate the lives lost and sacrifices made for them while surrounded by the beauty of Sydney's waters. Many people come to this area to picnic, celebrate, and play as well, consistent with Australian commemoration culture and remembrance, even though some other nations consider it disrespectful.

Sydney Spaceport: The fourth most well-known location in Sydney, the SSX still carries visible reminders of the infamous Aberrant attack. In the aftermath of the attack, Australia's different layers of government — from Sydney City, New South Wales state government, and the Federal Parliament — all agreed that evidence of the damage should remain as a permanent reminder of the role humanity's new defenders played in stopping the Aberrant menace, and to ensure Australia never forgets to remain vigilant against Aberrant return. When rebuilding the SSX, designers incorporated large pieces of rubble from the attack into the new building, surrounding each fragment with a blue border to match the Australian flag.

CHINA

Everyone over a certain age remembers where they were when the Aberrant War ended. History classes show the footage of Divis Mal's dramatic declaration and departure from the UN, but those old enough to have seen or heard it live on the news remember when China held the world hostage and the Aberrants blinked.

With the Earth Strike Ultimatum (as it's commonly known in China), humanity reclaimed control of its own planet after decades of being subject to the whims, both positive and negative, of quantum-powered superhumans. For a brief time, that control rested in the hands of China and its Premier Lin Huan. Rather than become a new fist gripping the world, she relinquished

the power granted by the orbital satellites, and the world let out a breath it didn't know it was holding.

China's place in the international community became an ongoing chain of reassurances. Yes, they had concluded there was no better way to save the world from the Aberrants. No, they were not going to pick up that particular sword again. Soon enough, they prepared to undo the arsenal of planet-threatening weaponry orbiting the Earth, as much to give Chinese industry something to do as to reassure the world that the Ultimatum was a one-time occurrence.

Meanwhile, back in China proper, much of life picked up where it left off. The Urban Schism never properly reached China as much as it did in most nations. First, there was no need for new rural settlements because the old ones were still there. Even by the mid-21st century, almost a quarter of China's population still lived in small villages and rural suburbs. Also, even the smallest farming towns possessed many of the technologies that made the Schism possible. In addition, during the heights of the Nova Age, China kept Project Utopia and its terraforming projects at arm's length. As a result, rural people still inhabited most of China's arable land. Second, the powerful urban centers of China weathered the blows of the Aberrant War far better thanks to solid urban planning and the enduring wisdom of the Bodhisattva and the 108 Auspicious Legislations.

A Child's Wisdom

It's unlikely the Bodhisattva herself coined the term "108 Auspicious Legislations" for the laws and regulations she passed for the benefit of China's economy (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 47). The prosperity they've brought, combined with the spiritually significant number, has made it a fitting name. The Legislations provide a framework for the Chinese economy that is beyond the understanding of human economists and experts but still provides for China to this day.

The interlocking Legislations have proven complicated enough to prevent duplication elsewhere, but also resist attempts to deconstruct them into an exploitable system. This also means that any new economic policy has to carefully work around the Legislations to maintain balance. Critics of China's bureaucracy argue that no matter how effective, these laws are older than the officials upholding them, and blind advocacy blocks necessary innovation. The counterargument, of course, is that discarding them means rebuilding China's economy from the ground up in the face of another war with the Aberrants and other threats from the stars.

From the Ashes

Outside of diplomatic meetings and bureaucratic chambers, China rebuilt. Every major population center saw massive infrastructure overhauls, not just to recover from damage dealt during the war, but to

GRAFFITI LOG 48A-C

Date: 3.7.2118, SHANGHAI, PUDONG

Registered with Office of Semiotics and Bureau of Social Statistics

The first image depicts a horned "demon" (presumably an Aberrant) with glowing eyes, breathing fire.

The second image depicts the same monster, dressed as a monk, breathing "¥" symbols.

The third image consists of a message: "Why is the Aberrants' hellfire illegal while their laws are embraced?"

Request analysis as to whether this is simple contrarianism or sincere Aberrant sympathy.

create a new China for this new era. Architects both literal and figurative replaced ancient structures with new buildings, while cultural and religious artifacts moved from temples to museums. Ambitious urban planners rebuilt the largest cities into modern arcologies of steel and asphalt and convenience, and these new structures came with bonus features.

The new buildings and related infrastructure incorporated microphones, cameras, and other sensors to monitor every aspect of public spaces. While restoring China's branch of the OpNet, technicians designed the new maintenance ducts and accesses for ease of installing and upgrading nodes used both to coordinate the new surveillance data and monitor OpNet traffic. Soon enough, all China's public space fell under the watchful eyes and ears of government operatives with the intent of making the people happier and the country more efficient.

For years, the watchers went unseen. The rebuilding went smoothly enough, sometimes with plans adjusted on the fly in response to initial public reactions. The swift apprehension of dangerous criminals and the ability to hold the Triads to their end of the arrangement made for a safer China, even as a critical mass of awareness built. Eventually people noticed that the police were slightly too efficient, and that inspired journalists to dig deeper, until the country's surveillance state became an open secret.

And that's even before the literal thought police arrived on the scene.

TODAY

As time passed, despite its portrayals in foreign media (much of which never makes it to Chinese minicomps) and the worst paranoid fantasies, the populace accepts the Ministry as a government

SUBJECT: TRIAD TRACKING

From: Xue Ch'eng, monitor agent, Organized Crime Management

To: Xiao Hong Kuo, Office of Noetic Security

Encryption: DSE

Transmission Type: Text with attached images

Date: 8:1:2120, 2:35pm

Getting straight to the point. I'm requesting assistance checking up on the killing last week. Sources say everything's sanctioned, but the arrangement only works if we can keep the Dragon's Coil Triad honest, so to speak. They designed their command structure to confuse even our best tracking algorithms and we can't find who gave the order. Current software agents see their leadership as ubiquitous and having a telepath or a clear narrow it down would be a great help.

appendage meant to improve their lives. Assorted Bureaus and Offices watch every aspect of public life, as well as much of every citizen's private life. As much as this horrifies many outsiders, the surveillance is subtle and discreet and the government using it legitimately takes good care of its citizens.

The sensors and recording devices do not merely monitor crime, but also watch the general tone and mood of public interaction. Behavioral engineers, working with sophisticated SIs, monitor data received from public places to get a sense for how the people feel and what officials can do to increase the populace's contentment. Some refer to the process as listening to the "music of the city." When all is well, neighborhoods are harmonious. Problems interrupt the "music" with discordant noise, and the engineers look for the disturbance.

The government tries to soothe an irate citizenry with solutions like low-level subsonic broadcasts and murals designed to promote particular moods. On a larger scale, they try to improve housing and working conditions or sponsor local festivals. Ministry telepaths solve tougher problems, often helping severely depressed or habitually angry individuals whose feelings can spread non-verbally.

QUIET LIFE

A great deal of China's populace has always been and continues to be rural. Cities and arcologies can seem cramped, and villages of just a few hundred or thousand people can offer room to breathe. While no less monitored than the cities, being away from the more urban areas offers an illusion of freedom that some people need.

In the modern day, "rural" doesn't have to mean "isolated" or "deprived." As the rest of the world discovered in the Urban Schism, modern technologies like hyperfusion, solar cells, and makers can support smaller communities' needs. Even before the near collapse of civilization brought on by the Aberrant War, China expanded its infrastructure to connect these villages and towns to the rest of the world via inexpensive maglev train or swift hover buses. The villages also have access to the OpNet and modern farming and medical technologies.

Even as much of China has moved forward, for some people life continues as it did a century ago. Villagers still farm, and the 108 Auspicious Legislations assist with supply chains and paths to market. As a result, rural farmers can provide for their families despite sharing a marketplace with modern hydroponic farms.

People in other parts of the world are moving back into the cities, but there's a percentage of China's population that travels back and forth. Rural teens often move into the cities when they come of age and over half will return to the smaller communities and villages of their families. At the same time, government programs send urban-born youth, particularly those with troublesome attitudes, to spend summers living and working on farms. They bring the lessons they've learned about themselves, often including a strong work ethic, back to the cities where they become happier, more productive members of society.

FLASHY AND LOUD

As much as the outlying areas have benefited from the technological advances of the last few decades, cities and arcologies best display the "new" China to the rest of the world. The cities are clean and safe. While the surveillance common in all prosperous nations has greatly reduced violent crime, China's ubiquitous surveillance also ensures that its rate of non-violent crimes is a slim fraction of many other equally developed nations. Even if some chafe at the paternal meddling of the government, real or imagined, it makes certain to provide for all its citizens' needs and leaves plenty of room for people to find their own destinies.

Modern China is still trying to find itself, and the Chinese government subtly encourages artists and philosophers to help weave a new tapestry to represent the nation. Galleries and graffiti display interpretations of a world cut off from foreign media, creating a mix of pride and concern at the government's work. Philosophers have time to prepare their thoughts and hold passionate debate in public forums and coffee houses, creating exchanges of ideas with the full knowledge that the government is paying attention from the very walls themselves.

Neo-Beijing in particular has become a testing ground for the nation. The bio-architecture sourced from Brunei has been a major facet of Neo-Beijing's arcology, and allows for near-constant alteration and experimentation with the buildings there. The surveillance apparatus of China has been a boon in this regard, reading the reactions of the people and directing the next wave of innovations. The government compensates the residents most affected by these changes, although the grumbling over being part of such experimentation in the first place has led to a lot of turnover in some of the more extreme building designs.

One change seen in the cities is the rise of hydroponic farming. The country's development from the

SUBJECT: CONCESSION REPORT

From: Tain Sung, analyst, Office of Semiotics

To: Jiao Hsueh, Office of Semiotics

Encryption: DSE

Transmission type: Text with attachment

Date: 4:13:2122, 5:02pm

As requested, I've acquired and attached the current business proposals floating around for the Concession, arranged in order from most to least concern.

The first four may be actively interested in bringing immigrants from the Corrupted zone itself and I recommend refusal outright. I am reaching out to Linh Hương within the Æsculapian Order and Hye-Jin Seung within the Æon Trinity to investigate suspected ties with Aberrant cults.

Entries five through 11 are simply large enough that allowing one may be fine, but too many would be economically deforming.

The next six are mostly harmless, with goals so minor as to basically be token efforts. I wouldn't allow all of them to go on, but half might be fine.

The last 10 are all art installations and the like. Filter out any whose work is inappropriate, maybe encourage the three most patriotic and let the rest do as they want.

late 20th through the early 21st century led to an increase in peri-urban agriculture, using suburban land for crops. As China recovered from the OpNet Crash, this land slowly became home to vertical hydroponic farms, producing more crops with less real estate.

The chief benefit is not only more efficient distribution of China's vast populace, but also allowing room for immigrants from less prosperous nations and those displaced by the *Esperanza* crash. Immigration is relatively simple, as Ministry agents and government behavioral psychologists can easily determine what positive and negative qualities someone would bring to the nation. Foreigners currently staying in the country on a visa and considering a permanent relocation find the process remarkably smooth.

Despite its ease, actual immigration numbers are relatively low due to foreign fearmongering about privacy in China. Even if someone doesn't believe the various paranoid theories about China's surveillance, almost everyone sees giving up most personal privacy as a big decision to make. Rumors whisper through the darker corners of the OpNet, claiming telepathic meddling when people come to China for work or study and wind up staying.

SHANGHAI

Shanghai has always been a liminal city. It's a center of Chinese commerce and trade, even though for a little under a century many other countries maintained enclaves within the city. On one side of the Huangpu River stood temples both ancient and reconstructed, while the other put modern skylines over one of the world's financial centerpieces. Now it's a city in transition, in a country in transition.

Shanghai was a common target during the Aberrant War. The quantum-powered monsters seeking civilian casualties couldn't resist the then-largest city in the world. The Aberrants wanting to score victories of morale targeted old religious structures that had, one way or another, survived religious purges. Both powerful military technology and a few trusted Chinese novas (while that trust lasted) worked tirelessly to defend Shanghai, but such battles were a regular occurrence.

Much of what the Aberrants didn't destroy came down after the Exodus. The rebirth of China from the ashes of the Aberrant War swept away many of Shanghai's older buildings. The government relegated culturally significant pieces of architecture and statuary to museums, reminding the people that this was the past and China was moving beyond it. While

Neo-Beijing remains an experiment of living architecture, Shanghai has become a top-of-the-line arcology.

Even without the ever-evolving nature of Neo-Beijing, Shanghai is a city that grows and changes in its own way. Shanghai's academic centers are an epicenter of SI and robotic development, second only to Nippon in such research. Local residents regularly see the first wave of new generations of robots meant to support modern living. The city's attempts to keep up with Nippon have become a point of pride, showing off the prosperity of modern China in a city known for such.

PUXI

Historically, Puxi is the core of the city, and still for the most part considered downtown. Located across several districts west of the Huangpu River, it contains the oldest portions of the city, including the "Old City" area defined by the original, once-walled borders of Shanghai. The border today survives as a series of historical markers, as the extensive renovation of the city has folded the Old City into the larger district.

Puxi contained the center of commerce back in colonial days and is still home to many foreign consulates as a way of maintaining business ties. While not full embassies (and thus not entirely protected from the country's surveillance or censorship apparatus), they still serve as a diplomatic resource for foreigners visiting Shanghai for business or tourism or both. Even with the rebuilding and restructuring of China, sites like the historic promenade of Waitan (also called "The Bund") remain popular tourist spots even when the modern interpretation is something more akin to a high-class boardwalk.

One part of this liminal city that tries to balance past and future is the old French Concession. Even long after control of it reverted to the city proper, the Concession held onto many French cultural and architectural elements until after the Crash, when it was rebuilt. As a sort of historic footnote, some of the new buildings retained a flair here, a distinct Parisian fence or railing there, but the notion that this had once been a French enclave was the province of AR overlays on walking tours.

And then the *Esperanza* crashed.

Since then, globally conscious artists and foreign business interests have insisted on "adjusting" the neighborhood in remembrance of France's loss. Wealthy ex-pats and French residents who were living abroad when the station came down have paid to remodel buildings and put up murals. Some say they have been trying to turn the old Concession into a new French enclave for themselves and loved ones looking to escape *la Blessure* (or at least, those that can pass the Corruption screenings). The government has thus far allowed the modifications, but residents have been quietly asking when the rebirth of "Paris of the East" will go too far for the government's liking.

GLANCING BACK

Alongside China's overall movement into the future, some insist on clinging to the past. The former homes of Jing'an Temple and the City God Temple have become museums and cultural centers, but that isn't enough for some young Chinese raised on tales of what came before by nostalgic grandparents. Activist artist groups such as the Old City Collective and the Five Constants Court promote these reminders of China's history. It's reached the point that the city regularly holds art festivals in these districts and encourages local businesses to display and support their works.

The end result winds up being more of a tourist trap than a retrospective of China's history, but more people see and absorb these snapshots of past culture, nonetheless. This has also led to some pushback and perceived competition with the Christian sects that venerate Proxy Bue Li as a spiritual figure.

PUDONG

The most important financial center in Earth-controlled space takes up most of the territory east of the Huangpu River. Before the war and the Crash, Pudong with its skyline atop the most successful of the Special Economic Zones became a tentpole of the international financial markets. The 108 Auspicious Legislations made Shanghai one of the most stable centers of trade and business in the world.

That stability survived the Crash. As the world markets rebuilt along with the OpNet, it became clear that financial restoration meant "catching up with Shanghai." The yuan is now the most accepted currency across Earth, Luna, and Mars, and Pudong is the fulcrum on which it pivots.

Foreign businesses show interest in any and all parts of Shanghai where they could make a profit, but Pudong is where the government tries to keep them in one place. It's historically had the most freedom for foreigners to invest, and even with China trying to reinvent itself the rest of the world still expects certain things to function as they once did. The Legislations encourage maintaining older practices, and these factors help keep this business activity in Pudong.

SUBURBS AND ISLANDS

The suburban districts around the two halves of the city center contain much of the residential

population of Shanghai. Historically, much of the outer edge was also farmland, but hydroponic farming now uses the majority of that real estate. Workers use the efficient mass transit network to get from anywhere in the suburbs to jobs in the center of the city in almost no time at all, and residents get all the benefits of living in a modern city, even when they're a couple of train stops removed from downtown.

The suburbs also contain Shanghai's vaunted institutions of learning, with a variety of universities teaching any subject relevant to the modern world. Shanghai Jiao Tong University in Minhang, once called the "MIT of the East" for its engineering and computer science programs, is a particular feather in the city's cap. The university's Department of Electronic Intelligence has the best research into artificial intelligence outside of Nippon and established the guidelines presented in the Shanghai Accords for such research.

The university is renowned for its research into next-gen SIs, exploring the limits of how advanced a software agent can be while still considered both useful and safe. They mutually share information with other schools worldwide and collaborate with the Noetic Institutes, although even a tenuous partnership with the Ministry has discouraged Nihonjin contribution to the research. The Unchained (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 72) have quietly offered assistance to some of DEI's researchers, though the scholars are as yet unaware of their true nature.

The Department's projects also develop the SIs used by the police to track crime, both allowed and otherwise, as well as the advanced algorithms used in maintaining the censorship over foreign media and the OpNet. The Chinese government has also made large amounts of public surveillance data available to teach SIs how to read human behavior and determine patterns and intent. Researchers walk a fine line in SI adaptability that doesn't violate the Accords, but the end result is some of the most responsive consumer software agents in the industry.

The DEI has a partnership with the Noetic Institute in Yangpu, where they study differences between electronic minds and biological ones to better understand nonhuman mindsets. The Institute, in turn, shares access with one of the few surviving true AIs for research purposes. While being mindful of the Accords, they have attempted to model a variety of nonhuman intelligences digitally, not only aliens but also Aberrant minds as well.

Further out, at the mouth of the Yangtze, a series of islands outside the arcology proper provide low-cost housing. The train system extends to the islands, with ferries carrying vehicles and cargo. The largest of the islands, Chongming, contains Shanghai's spaceport. It's an open secret that the local government accepts the inconvenience of putting the spaceport on an island because of the security provided by its distance from the mainland. On the off chance that the spaceport draws trouble or comes under attack, there are systems in place to seal it off and establish a quarantine if need be. When China can't effectively monitor threats from outside, they spare no effort in potential countermeasures.

FEDERATED STATES OF AMERICA

The old United States' transformation into the FSA was a tragedy a century in the making, the apotheosis of the military-industrial complex about which President Eisenhower warned his citizens. In hindsight, it was wholly preventable. At the time, the events driving it were out-of-context problems for everyone involved in the decisions.

DISSOLUTION

In the Nova Age, the US' global media dominance, the presence of the UN and the Æon Society, and the contagion effect of nova eruption all led the country to host a higher-than-average share of novas. Combat there during the Aberrant War was consequently some of the world's heaviest. Aberrants targeted the government early and often, both for strategic goals and symbolic impact. Continuity plans designed for nuclear war were insufficient in the face of this precisely targeted destruction, especially when military and security novas turned on their leaders. Presidential succession protocols could barely keep pace with assassinations.

The American public was no better off. Even before the Wycoff explosion, infrastructure attacks and collateral damage had crippled basic services. Since the Cold War's end, emergency planners had assumed help would be available domestically in even the worst disasters. By 2061, there was nowhere from which help *could* come.

Although grievously depleted by years of asymmetrical parahuman warfare, the US military retained three capabilities the federal government had lost: functioning lines of succession, nationwide communications, and reserves of critical resources. Local and state authorities were clearly incapable of maintaining public order, so the September 28, 2061 presidential declaration of martial law was technically legal under the Insurrection Act of 1807. It was also the last historically significant action of the last US president. Within six months, the war had eliminated so many federal officials that a new constitutional convention was necessary to restart a legal government.

EXPANSION

The generals who found themselves running the US didn't mean to create a paranoid fascist state. Partitioning the country into Provisional Military Districts centered on major bases and troop concentrations was a logical step in dividing responsibilities. The fact that it undercut some of the most anti-military governors by splitting their states across PMDs was just a bonus. As famine and disease spawned civil unrest, some Aberrants shifted their tactics, using existing anger to undercut the military government's legitimacy. To senior officers who'd risen through the ranks in foreign peacekeeping actions, counter-insurgency tactics were the biggest hammer in the toolbox, and their own citizens looked increasingly like nails.

The US military had always planned *ad absurdum*. From fending off aliens in enormous colony-ships to annexing Canada and Mexico for resources, no scenario was too *outré*. Facing a national mass die-off, the Joint Chiefs reached for a set of pre-made decisions rather than waste time in committees. Special operations troops had been operating covertly in northern Mexico for years to suppress Aberrants there, so current intelligence was in hand — and the Mexican government was reeling from its own Aberrant issues and natural disasters. In March 2062, troops entered Mexico in the first wave of Operation Catalpa.

Even as "stabilization" operations spread through Mexico, the CIA was preparing for the second front. As the least-impaired US intelligence agency, it had spent years absorbing its counterparts' orphaned assets. Now it turned to destabilization, fomenting Québécois rebellion and aiding Canadian Aberrant cults. By mid-2063, as troops returning from Mexico were staging on the northern border, the seeds for Operation Typewriter were sprouting alongside the Canadian grain harvest America believed it needed for survival.

CONSOLIDATION

Since 2061, opportunistic politicians had attached themselves to military leaders as "civil affairs advisors," assisting in governance where the military was ill-equipped to act. The canniest obtained field commissions to solidify their positions within the new order. As Canadian pacification wound down, these leaders sought to shape the nation that would emerge from the smoke.

Simultaneously, the surviving megacorporations raised their heads. In the prewar years, they'd built their own security departments, which they'd used to protect their assets (while ruinously expensive, housing key workers in fortified industrial compounds was more cost-effective than letting them die and training replacements). Now, battered but still capable, they were ready to help rebuild — but not without a price. Wary of nationalization at gunpoint, they sought autonomy.

Meanwhile, the quietly conservative Midwest saw a biblical End of Days unfolding in the Blight. Apocalyptic Christian sects arose in stricken agricultural communities and spread across the country. They offered order and structure — and, as the highest-functioning organizations in many areas, partnered with the military in resource distribution. Militant Catholicism resurfaced in Mexico and Canada with similar outcomes.

Over the winter of 2068, leaders from the military, the CIA, the "Big 40" corporations, and the foremost mega-churches met in northern Arkansas. The result was the Fayetteville Accords, which laid out the structure of the new Federated States of America. The Accords set the PMDs and Mexican and Canadian occupation zones as the new nation's administrative districts; granted extraterritoriality to large corporations; defined the citizenship classes; acknowledged Christianity as the national religion and English as the national language; and established the new federal government structure. Among the elements the framers deliberately excluded from the Accords were true democracy, civilian control of the military, and an enumeration of universal rights. Also, while racism is mostly a thing of the past in the FSA, prejudice against immigrants is stronger than ever, and racism has been replaced by a strong expectation of assimilation and distrust of anyone who doesn't. In addition to distrusting immigrants, many in the FSA mistrust and discriminate against native peoples who seek to keep their culture alive and anyone who openly practices a religion other than Christianity.

HOUSE OF CARDS, HOUSE OF STONE

Today's FSA is an uncoordinated monstrosity, mostly by design. Each district is largely self-governing, sending one representative to the Federated Districts Board to sit alongside those of the FSM (Federated States Military) and CSA (Central Security Agency). From the capital complex in the New District of Columbia arcology, the FedBoard jointly holds executive power, coordinates national policy, and appoints the secretaries who head

REDISTRICTING

The following are the 17 districts of the FSA and the former states and provinces each one incorporates. The Accords renamed several states that PMD lines had split.

Altiplano: Aguascalientes, Durango, Nayarit, San Luis Potosi, Tamaulipas, Zacatecas.

Appalachia: East Kentucky, Franklin (formerly eastern Tennessee), West Virginia.

California: Baja California, Baja California Sur, Sinaloa, Sonora, South California, South Nevada.

Cascadia: Idaho, Jefferson (formerly northern California), Oregon, South Columbia (formerly British Columbia), Washington.

Dixie: Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia.

Great Lakes: Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, North Illinois, Ohio, South Ontario, Wisconsin.

Gulf: Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi.

Heartland: Arkansas, East Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Illinois, West Kentucky, West Tennessee.

High Plains: Montana, South Alberta, North Dakota, South Dakota, South Saskatchewan, Wyoming.

Hudson: Manitoba, North Ontario, Nunavut.

Labrador: Newfoundland and Labrador, Maine, New Brunswick, New Hampshire, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island

Northeast: Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia.

Northwest: Alaska, Denendeh (formerly Northwest Territories), North Alberta, North Columbia (formerly British Columbia), North Saskatchewan, Yukon.

Sierra Nevada: Colima, Estado de México, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Jalisco, Michoacán, Morelos, Puebla, Querétaro, Tlaxcala.

Southwest: Arizona, New Mexico, North Nevada, Utah, West Colorado.

Tehuantepec: Campeche, Chiapas, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Veracruz, Yucatán.

Texas: Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, Texas.

This doesn't account for Québec, which is (on paper) independent. Nor does it include Hawai'i and the former US territories, which reverted to self-governance during the late Aberrant War and now enjoy, depending on their location, the protection of either China or Sudamérica.

the federal departments: Budget and Management, Communication, Education, Justice and Security, Labor and Industry, and National Resources. In theory, it also appoints the Secretaries of War and Intelligence (respectively, heads of the FSM and CSA), but that's always been a rubber-stamp power.

Outside the FSM and CSA, real power lies in the district boards. Technically, citizens elect representatives to the boards, but corporations hold voting rights on the basis of taxes paid. Consequently, the only citizens who get actual representation are in jurisdictions too ravaged to attract corporate interest.

The old states and provinces still exist (mostly) within the districts, but their power is sharply curtailed. The districts emerged from military operational areas, so they don't always follow logical or culturally relevant lines. In particular, the districts incorporating Canadian and Mexican territory pointedly reflect invasion milestones.

WAR MACHINE

The FSA's most powerful faction is the military. The FSM incorporated the old US military, Coast Guard, Border Patrol, TSA, and the fragments of the

Canadian and Mexican militaries that it deemed reliable enough to keep. It's neither the best-equipped nor best-trained force on the planet, but it is the biggest. This is somewhat misleading; over half its total strength aims inward. It's as much regime protection force as national defense establishment.

In districts without major insurgencies, the FSM keeps a low profile. Officially it leaves policing to cops while it focuses on training, watching the borders, generating good PR, and responding to natural (and Aberrant caused) disasters. In these areas, units occupy large centralized bases, set on the edges of major metro areas or amidst wasteland training reserves.

In restive districts, the iron gauntlet is far more obvious. Troops patrol and set up checkpoints in search of insurgents, contraband, or subversive propaganda. Heavy combat vehicles clog traffic in show-of-force operations. Deployments are broad and decentralized, with mutually supporting firebases dotting the landscape. There's no prohibition on military personnel holding office, so captains and majors commonly hold local office, with colonels in state positions and generals on district boards. In addition, there is extensive cooperation between the FSM and most local police departments, and many police officers are veterans. In potentially threatening situations, most police in the FSA wear and carry military hardware — only their uniforms are different.

FSM headquarters is Bancroft Center, a sprawling arcology south of the Atlanta megaplex. However, taking out "BC" would only hurt its administrative processes, not its combat power. Corps and division commanders have free rein so long as they stay within the bounds of FSM (not necessarily FedBoard) policy.

ENIGMA MACHINE

The Central Security Agency absorbed all the old US intelligence community that the FSM didn't grab first, along with the FBI, DHS, and an assortment of other federal functions. The CSA would easily rival the FSM if it could make all its components work together. However, silos and rivalries continue no matter how many middle managers get sacked.

Outside FSA borders, the CSA is quite good at espionage and covert operations. Foreign threats have a unifying effect. The CSA spies on *every* nation and has covert operations assets poised everywhere. It's most active in the UAN and Oceania, supporting everything from outspoken media personalities to terrorists. It would like to be equally aggressive in China, but the Ministry is every bit its match.

Internally, silos and turf battles mean the CSA spends as much time fighting itself as it does finding actual security threats. Many successes are a result of its size — critics refer to it as the blind squirrel of counterintelligence, occasionally managing to find a few nuts despite its self-imposed handicaps. In truth, parts of the CSA are adept at their own pieces of the job; putting the pieces together is where they fail. Recently, analytical groups have started building their own tactical teams and vice versa, resulting in even more conflict when two or more offices go after the same target.

The effectiveness of CSA surveillance and human intelligence in any area are directly proportional to how much the taxpayers care about that place. In first-class arcologies, the agency has a clear idea of what's happening. In rural Blight towns, it may have one informant on the payroll, but all the neighbors know his price for not reporting something.

CSA headquarters is the National Total Information Center near Salt Lake City. Most of NTIC is subterranean, holding the agency's vast supercomputer farms and data repositories. Every district has a satellite headquarters and runs local operations through field offices in major cities and megaplexes.

MONEY MACHINE

The Fayetteville Accords enshrined the principle of corporation-as-person. The logical outgrowth of this is a government that benefits the hand that feeds it. The most influential corporations are the Big 40 (the actual number fluctuates but is currently 53), each of which pays enough in taxes to earn the privilege of extraterritoriality.

Corporate "XT" means that the company in question exists as its own jurisdiction wherever it owns land or arcology space. It's immune to district and local laws, answering only to the federal government (practically, the FSM and CSA). It can pass and enforce its own laws, set its own quality, safety, and environmental standards, and treat its workers however it wants. Most of the Big 40 own entire arcologies, which contain research, manufacturing, and residential facilities.

The FedBoard can revoke XT for a location or a whole corporation. It rarely does this, but certain violations, usually those which threaten national security or the FedBoard's own interests, call for disproportionate responses to keep the rest of the metacorps on their toes. The FSM and CSA would love to yank Orgotek's XT, but Prexy Cassel has a great legal department.

GOD MACHINE

Christian fundamentalism, a bastion of early FSA culture, is declining. The mega-churches that came to the table in Fayetteville maintained their tax-exempt status but failed to foresee the consequences. No taxes means no votes. While the churches' congregations were strong voting blocs, the corporations have outstripped the flocks. Further, church attendance is down thanks to cultural shifts driven by the media corps and the Department of Communication. The federal government and the Big 40 both recognize the danger of unchecked religious fervor and, in rare cooperation, are making the state itself the only state religion.

This isn't to say the FSA is a secular nation. A majority of citizens still attend services, though the proportion of true believers to social worshippers is shifting. Some leaders recognize the danger to their power and are radicalizing their followers to take back "one nation under God."

COGS IN THE MACHINE

By design, the FSA's citizenship system rewards those whose taxes support government functions with a greater allocation of those same services. While no law bars upward mobility, second-class citizens are so disadvantaged that "making it to first" is vanishingly rare. With fewer educational opportunities, less economic security, and no government representation, second-class citizenship formalizes the worst problems of wealth inequality in a capitalist society.

The FSA curates the few paths to first-class citizenship to ensure that only the right sort of people bootstrap themselves up. Chief among these paths is service in law enforcement or the FSM. Police officers have provisional first-class citizenship for the duration of their employment, ensuring that first-class citizens can't complain about class inferiors policing them. This becomes permanent as a retirement benefit after 20 years of service. Military enlistees likewise become "provis" after reaching the rank of sergeant; again, retirement makes it permanent. Similar channels exist in most federal departments., though low-risk desk jobs require more years of service for permanent first-class awards.

It's easier to fall. Layoffs, family medical leave, and similar circumstances aren't excuses for missing that ¥10k tax threshold. Once a citizen loses first-class status, it's hard to climb back out of the pit. A few charities offer tax subsidies to those in danger of a downgrade, but most are faith-based and only support members of their denominations.

In between second-class citizens and non-citizens is the invisible class of "unrecs" — unregistered citizens. These people would be eligible for second-class citizenship due to their parentage, but they lack official records, usually because they were born in rural areas without a full-time government presence to register their existence. The process for correcting an unrec's lack of documentation itself requires other records that rarely exist in the first place. The one advantage is that if there are no official records of a whole community, the authorities don't know they should pay attention to it.

SMASH THE MACHINE!

Widespread discontent plagues the FSA. Class warfare is supposed to keep the masses distracted. It's not working. Three major movements vie for FSM and CSA attention.

The largest and most militarily capable is the *Nueva Revolución de México*. After smashing the Mexican Army and government, the invaders turned on Canada, leaving only token forces in the south. This allowed Mexican freedom fighters to grow unchecked. By the time the FSM was able to focus on the southern districts again, a low-level insurgency was aflame across Mexico that's never subsided.

THE STATUS OF QUÉBEC

Because of its help with the conquest of Canada, the FSA gave Québec a series of special rights, including supposed independence. In actuality, the primary right Québec gained is permission to remain proudly bilingual, despite English being the FSA's official language. In addition, most of Québec's rich and powerful families maintain their positions of wealth and privilege. However, the FSA treats ordinary residents of Québec no differently than anyone else. Québec is a self-governing region but is also subject to the same FSA laws as the FSA's 17 official districts. Grim jokes about their "independence" are common among Québécois second-class citizens.

NRM strikes destroyed several major bases along the old Mexican border in 2121 and the FSM is still recovering from those losses. This has emboldened *guerrero* commanders in the far south, who now solicit overt help from Sudamérican governments in their own attacks on military and corporate facilities.

The Canadian resistance, self-styled as the Northern Lights, is less insurgency and more social movement. Thanks to the NorLights, Canadian nationalism may be stronger and more consistent now than before the invasion. The CSA can't stem the flood of propaganda gushing from basement design studios and pirate OpNet taps and can do little against the many wealthy and well-educated first-class citizens who walk right up to, but never quite over, the line. There are violent rebels, but they're the minority and the NorLights disavows those who harm fellow Canadians. Québécois quislings are fair game, though.

Finally, True American ideology advocates a resurrection of the United States Constitution and the rule of law that it idealized. Trumerican movements are too diverse to generalize. In first-class arcologies, they're cautious, wistful historical societies. In rural areas, passive resistance, sullen mutterings, and occasional sabotage are the name of the game. Slums, unreconstructed urban wastelands, and wilderness areas all hide resistance fighters of varying competence and aggression.

The FSA's sheer size makes eradicating these movements a Sisyphean task. Moreover, several foreign powers (and at least two psi orders) have vested interests in undermining the FSA, so covert aid continues to trickle into the country from all directions. A nationwide uprising is unlikely, but if a savvy leader can lead the overthrow of one district, it just might spread.

THE SECOND CITY

New New York sounds like it stuttered when it rebuilt. New DC is still a malaria-infested swamp with all the bloodsuckers inside the arcologies. There'll always be someone ready to burn down Atlanta again. Seattle, LA, have fun with your next earthquakes. Chicago? Down but not out. This city has big enough shoulders to take the weight of a nation.

The Chicago megaplex sprawls around Lake Michigan from Milwaukee to Grand Rapids, and as far inland as Peoria. Most Chicagoans, though, consider anything beyond the arcologies of Gary and Kenosha to be riding their coattails. This inner region's official population is 16 million, but non-citizens and unrecs push that close to 18 million.

During the Nova Age, Chicago was one of the first American cities to see extensive arcology construction. The Amber Preservationist architectural style arose here, placing historic buildings (and sometimes whole neighborhoods) under transparent sapphire and constructing around, over, and under them to accommodate the demand for housing and office space. Many famous novas made their homes here, as well as countless other celebrities.

During the Aberrant War, Chicago suffered, but avoided the total devastation many of its peers experienced. Fighting leveled suburbs and toppled arco-blocks into Lake Michigan but this was collateral damage. No deliberate mass destruction targeted the whole city. When the Blight came, many refugees headed for Chicago. City leaders and their military counterparts saw a ready-made labor pool for the brute-force work of digging out. Conditions in the refugee camps and the work itself claimed countless lives but this gave Chicago a jump-start on recovery.

The FSA's designation of Chicago as the capital of the Great Lakes District brought an influx of government funds and workers. The FSM also placed its district headquarters here, spurring further growth on the northern shoreline. As the Blight's permanence became apparent, arcology construction picked up again, stacking housing vertically so emergency projects could transform Chicago's suburban sprawl into high-efficiency corporate farmland.

This latter work made Chicago the focus of a grand arco-strip stretching from Indianapolis to Minneapolis, a necklace of arcologies linked by high-speed magtrains and surrounded with reclaimed cropland. Corruption, sabotage, and design creep rendered it stillborn. When the tides of progress receded, they left behind a state-sized debris field that was ready-made shelter for Blight refugees and unrecs. In Chicago proper, though, construction continued apace, even speeding up as workers dismissed from the strip project made their way here.

A SECOND GILDED AGE

Chicago today is the FSA's most prosperous city. In addition to its government and military significance, it hosts four Big 40 corporate headquarters: Krieger Robotics, food conglomerate ADM-Con-K, industrial equipment manufacturer Cat Fusion, and DDARF Investment Group. Numerous smaller companies also call Chicago home; it's a hub for finance, insurance, and biotech.

Chicago culture always held a strong work ethic, one that a generation of refugees from the rural American Midwest has only reinforced. A surprising number of Chicagoans with working-class jobs can afford first-class citizenship, and they're a strong counterbalance to the usual class tensions. The city's traditional role as an immigration magnet diminished as the FSA's international appeal crumbled, but it is a destination for arrivals from the Canadian and Mexican districts (thus a meeting point for NRM, NorLight, and Trumerican rebels). Even the government and military personnel stationed here aren't immune to Chicagoan comradeship, a fact which concerns the CSA.

Chicago has saved more of its history than most North American cities, and the Chicago flag proudly flies next to the FSA's on official buildings and many private residences. With the exception of Willis Tower's destruction and the looting of the Field Museum, most local landmarks survived the Aberrant War. This, too, irritates federal authorities, who dislike inconvenient reminders of American history.

Much as the FSA would like to gloss over the fact, though, no small part of Chicago's success is due to the Æon Trinity. The organization's physical presence out masses all but the Big 40 corporations, spanning the Cube, Hyde Park, Proteus' subterranean complex, and the preserved historic neighborhood around the Society's original home (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 184). Its political and cultural influence are greater still. Even in the Aberrant War's darkest hours, Æon representatives were on Chicago's streets and in the camps, bringing hope and direction. Thanks to the organization's relentless public relations staff, anti-psion sentiment is lower in downtown Chicago than anywhere else in the country. Æon's headquarters draws more foreign visitors than any other FSA city, and Chicagoans look upon the rest of the world without a haze of xenophobia.

THE LOOP

With the historic magtrain line that gives it its name also marking its perimeter, the Loop is Chicago's central business district. Arcologies now dominate it, but many are Amber Preservation works that maintain two-century-old structures amid towering glass canyons. Most of the old waterfront is intact, too, including Grant Park, the Art Institute, and the adjacent Museum Campus. The Cube anchors the Loop's southwest corner, sitting on the Chicago River's west shore atop a major magtrain station.

Hyde Park

The pairing of the University of Chicago and Æon's Triton campus makes this venerable neighborhood a global magnet for academia. Much of the area suffered heavy damage during Aberrant attacks on the university, and private investors rebuilt it in the 2080s as a mixture of research park and middle-class housing. The fully recovered university is best known for its business school, physics research (having taken over the former Argonne National Laboratory and Fermilab), and public policy programs. Troublingly, several recent Aberrant attacks have targeted Hyde Park, though Triton security forces have thwarted each one.

Meigs Starport

Once a small downtown airport located on an artificial island in Lake Michigan, Meigs Field met its end in 2003 through controversial mayoral fiat. Late 21st century growth in the Loop created the need for convenient downtown air service beneath the unpredictable winds of arcology roofs. In 2103, Meigs Field rose from the grave, providing VTOL landing space, docks for hybrids capable of water landings, and eventual bioblimp moorings. Its current grandiose name (and robust security) came from the 2121 installation of Chicago's jump ring terminal, which FSA authorities insisted be on land under their control.

Europe: France

Shattered by the apocalyptic descent of the *Esperanza* space station three years ago, France no longer functionally exists as a nation. The crash scarred and gouged the once beautiful countryside with impact craters and radiation; the shining urban metroplexes are burned-out shells crawling with sub-Aberrant mutants. Among the desperate and hardy who still dwell in these wastes, life is about the basics of survival and the occasional bright moment of opportunity, clawing whatever relics of the past they can out of the ashen grasp of their dead land.

The France of old is not entirely gone. A tenuous government clings to existence in the Atlantic coastal enclaves, trying to shift the balance of power between the French diaspora and the oft-unwelcoming neighbors at whose gates the refugees clamor. A handful of resilient settlements in the interior refuse to give ground to the ravages of *la Blessure*, serving as oases of civilization amid the wreckage. While the scars of radiation and Corruption will not fade any time soon, nature itself slowly rallies; valleys of black ash see the slow emergence of renewed life, even if some of it comes in entirely unrecognizable forms.

Still, in the eyes of many international players, France remains a corpse — a nation beyond resuscitation, little more than carrion for scavengers to pick over. It's easy to shrug off the difficult task of trying to restore what was lost and instead treat *la Blessure* as a dead zone, a place worthy only of quarantine and then, ideally, forgetting its horrors entirely.

The dark interior of France remains alluring, however. For some, the risks of bandits, radiation, and Corruption are worth the chance to pry old treasures loose from the rubble, to dig out the final secrets of the French government, or to bring succor to those in need. Adventurers, scavengers, and doctors come to scour the broken land and seek out its inhabitants. For a ruined wasteland, France sees more arrivals than one might expect — and certainly far more than officials along the processing points of the Wall or the port authorities of the provisional government ever record.

Life Among the Ruins

Away from the western and southern coastlines, acquiring even the very basics of everyday survival can be a tribulation for survivors and scavengers. Ash, run-off sludge from the radioactive landscape, and thick algae blooms choke watercourses. In the blasted countryside, twisted trees and tangled vines sometimes bear wild fruit and berries, and fungus is common enough where the woodlands and fields have collapsed into rotting mulch, but it takes hard experience to learn what's safe to eat and what's not. Most livestock perished soon after the crash, briefly filling the farms with piles of irradiated, reeking meat. Wild animals are slowly returning, although Corruption has warped some into new, aggressive forms, and the most common creatures of *la Blessure* are the rats. Always the hungry rats, scurrying in the shadows, fleeing in terror only until enough have gathered to turn suddenly as a swarm of ravenous desperation.

As it's so risky to try and live off the land, most travelers stock up at a port or enclave before venturing out into the waste. *Blessure* settlements maintain

what water purification systems they can, and often farm carefully reclaimed and well-protected areas of land. Cage-farms of rats and advanced insect protein set-ups outnumber normal livestock. Canned and preserved goods of any kind are highly valued among the locals, enough to trade or even kill for. To an outsider, it can seem completely absurd that in this day and age a pack of dried meat could stir such avarice and greed, but out in *la Blessure*, every mouthful of food is worth fighting to secure.

A good stock of food and water isn't enough. The landscape itself is hostile. Geiger counters and tools to detect the presence of quantum Corruption are vital — the former more so than the latter, ironically, because Quantum Flux often twists the local wildlife into absurd shapes, whereas radiation offers few warning signs of its presence. The impact of the *Esperanza* threw immense amounts of tainted particulates into the atmosphere, and even three years later the winds pull more up from the arid ground. Filter masks or sealed breathing systems are ubiquitous, from the shambolic patchworks of wasteland renegades to the gleaming rebreathers of Æsculapian doctors. When it rains, the droplets are dirty and stained with the ash they bring down from the atmosphere above.

People in this devastated land scavenge from the wreckage of their old lives and barter for whatever new parts they can get from the outside world. Weaponry is common but often poor quality, from crude razor-wire-wrapped mauls to rusting firearms. Although transport infrastructure is largely gone, people travel where they can via vehicle along muddy tracks and broken highways, and many enclaves have fields of solar panels to charge the precious wagons and trucks for such dangerous journeys. Sealed and armored, settlement convoys are the safest way for locals to move from place to place.

LA BLESSURE

La Blessure covers most of France. The bulk of the *Esperanza* came down on Paris and the north, but smaller pieces broke away and slammed down all across the country, each hitting with the force of a meteor in a bright bloom of firestorms that burned all the way down to the southern seaboard. This physical damage was terrible enough, but the systems and reactors aboard the space station also vomited forth a great deal of radioactive material — and the spiteful power of the Aberrants who set the catastrophe into motion added colossal surges of Quantum Flux into the mix.

The result is a wasteland unlike any other on Earth. Hills shattered, cities burned, and gouged valleys where none had been before. Entire forests withered and perished from radiation, and the surfaces of lakes became clotted with rotting organic mulch. Large proportions of the country no longer correspond to topographical maps from before the crash. The drastically altered drainage of the landscape chokes old rivers and births new ones. An enormous piece of the *Esperanza* effectively decapitated the Puy de Sancy, the tallest mountain in the Massif Central range, when it slammed into the mountain's upper slopes at meteoric speeds.

La Blessure is no longer the burning desolation it was in the days and weeks following the crash. A few fires still smolder in the guts of ruined arcologies, but the wasteland alternates between mud or arid dust depending on the season. Sudden mudslides can drown small survivor settlements after heavy rain, with so little vegetation to hold the earth in place. That vegetation returns with each passing month, though, in a creeping reclamation by hardy species capable of surviving the tainted influence of the landscape.

Few people want to dwell in *la Blessure*, yet more than a million still do. Most of the surviving French population fled to the border encampments or coastal settlements. What remains are the determined and stubborn who refuse to leave their homeland, and the desperate and unwanted who were forced to adapt to the cruel new arithmetic of life in *la Blessure*. Some of these locals have turned to banditry to supplement their fragile existences, though none of them can sustain themselves this way. There simply aren't enough victims traveling the broken highways to prey upon. Instead they carve what meager resources they can from little stretches of healthy soil, and scrabble in the ruins of the old world for whatever trinkets or scraps they might trade at an enclave for another few days of survival.

Those who come to *la Blessure* from outside possess powerful motivations to undertake such a dangerous journey. Some just want to help. Greed or fascination drives most, hoping to plunder whatever treasures the French government may have left behind. Before the disaster, France was a powerful and rich nation with cutting edge technological and military research — some of which still lies, sleeping and forgotten, in old laboratories or military bases. Increasingly, as the wasteland recovers and connections into the interior improve, a third group of

outsiders come to exploit *la Blessure*. Relief convoys and refugee processing centers help mask the movement of criminal organizations, using the wasteland and the Atlantic ports as a corridor into central Europe. No authority watches over the wasteland, and the years of grinding misery in the border camps has created fertile ground for corruption and bribery amid the supposedly vigilant guardians there. The crowded masses huddled at the doorstep of the central nations provides plentiful cover for such conspiracies to hide beneath.

Extreme weather phenomena and other weird anomalies occur across *la Blessure* but are most common the closer one gets to the grave-city of Paris itself. Either the unfettered Quantum Flux of the area is to blame, or — as the Æon Trinity fears may be the case — several powerful Aberrants with weather and energy control came down upon the *Esperanza*, and even now work to shield Paris from approach. What they might be doing in that dead domain is, itself, a deep cause for concern.

THE NORTHERN SLUMP

North of Paris, much of *la Blessure* is a tangle of sluggish rivers wending between quagmires, a morass punctuated by the rusting bones of the old world and the rising dry ground of hills. The space station's impact caused such convulsions of the earth as to effectively sink the coastline, shattering it into a disordered scattering of broken islets. Initially, these newborn wetlands were a dead zone of stinking slime as the run-off from Paris's obliteration flooded them with toxic pollutants, but they've bounced back with surprising swiftness. Although mist-shrouded Quantum Flux zones and poisonous streams still render the slump a dangerous place, springtime already brings a verdant eruption of new grasses; birds and small animals now fill the place with life.

The same is sadly not true for the sea, where the outflow of the slump still pours forth vast quantities of dangerous run-off each time the rains pour down upon Paris. The English Channel has experienced a die-off of native marine life, although strict United Republic quarantines and ecological monitoring programs are having some success in beginning the clean-up process.

Locals in the slump build their settlements on hilltops and mostly use boats to get around. There's less banditry here than farther south, but the landscape itself is more treacherous. Travelers regularly report weird water currents that briefly stop obeying the laws of physics, unexpected whirlpools appearing in placid, broad rivers, and bioluminescent tides that corrode metal. What seems to be a unique breed of sub-Aberrant mutant also thrives in the wetlands; these lanky, pallid creatures snatch unwary victims into the water.

LA CAMPAGNE

With morbid humor, survivors refer to the southern and majority part of *la Blessure* as *la campagne*, or the countryside. Running from Paris down almost to the Mediterranean, this area remains a disaster of monolithic scale, an inhospitable place where humans act like animals in their desperation to survive. Despite the moniker, a great deal of *la campagne* was heavily urbanized prior to the impact, with immense cities and cutting-edge arcologies.

Just three years on, *la campagne* still holds traces of the immediate, terrifying aftermath. Major cities that fragments of the *Esperanza* didn't destroy are hollow, slumping shadows of their former selves. Rusting hulks of vehicles litter major thoroughfares, grim reminders of the panicked hours when millions attempted to flee on already packed roads. The digital displays in shop windows are mostly broken and dead, but a few still fizz into life when they detect someone moving nearby, briefly blaring loud advertisements to break the solemn silence of these suffocated cities.

The cities of *la campagne* are major targets for scavenging and regularly see scuffles between survivors over choice finds. The easy prizes are all long-gone — the cans on shop shelves, the back-up generators in the basements of government buildings, the biotech maintenance fluids in corporate facilities. Much yet remains buried amid rubble or behind locked doors, though. With so few survivors, it will be years yet before they can pick the bones of these cities completely clean.

BLESSURE ENCLAVES

Survivors built most enclaves in *la Blessure* on the foundations of pre-disaster countryside villages, now ringed with fast-fabricated wall blocks, rusting barricades, and watch-posts. Rare is the settlement in a ruined town or city; the environs attract too many scavengers, offer too much cover to approaching raiders, and grant little to no tillable soil. It's possible to maintain a food supply with enclosed hydroculture units, but disappearingly few communities in *la Blessure* have the luxury of such resources, let alone

the reliable supplies needed to maintain it. The bulk of enclaves are nothing more than harbors of questionable safety against the terrors of the wasteland, but a few possess more significance.

La Ville de Dominique is perhaps the largest and best-known of the survivor enclaves in *la campagne*. Ruled by the eponymous Dominique, a hard-nosed former French military officer, the town clusters closely around a military base and has fierce defensive emplacements that guarantee the safety of its inhabitants. While the enclave has draconian laws, it's not run as a military hierarchy. In the first weeks following the crash, the troops stationed in the base fell into looting and abuse of the surviving local populace under the pretense of maintaining order, until Dominique and a ragtag band of deserters arrived to drive them out. The settlement has an adversarial attitude towards the provisional government and, indeed, towards anyone claiming military authority. Given that Dominique's sitting on a huge cache of pre-disaster military hardware, this is a regular source of trouble. Rumors have it that the French government stored Aberrant tech under the site, and that Dominique is paranoid about such terrors getting loose.

In the northern wetlands, *Pont Harlequin* rears out of the damp squalor upon vast concrete pillars. Once a major bridge over a wide river, the *Pont* now serves as a dry bastion against marsh raiders, mutants, and bandits. One end of the Pont descends into the water, where a veritable crowd of vessels moor — patrol boats with machine guns and harpoons, wallowing merchant barges offloading their precious wares, the sleek vessels of outsider treasure-hunters sticking out like sore thumbs. A massive floating hospital, the *Montreuil*, is a permanent fixture staffed by Æsculapian medics and aid organization representatives, complete with landing pad for small aircraft. The bridge itself is a crowded shanty town, with cramped avenues jammed between rising layers of construction. The enclave terminates violently where the middle of the bridge collapsed, and here stands the crude laboratory-fortress of Martel, self-proclaimed warlord and protector of the area. He and his thugs police *Pont Harlequin* in a mismatched motley of salvaged gear and biotech and include most of the surviving community of French aquas. Word is that the Martel has support from Orgotek, though it's not entirely clear what the psi order is getting out of the deal.

While most Aberrants enter into the lives of survivors as brief, terrifying apparitions, the *Hospice des Enfants-Rouges* presents an entirely different face. The

rolling convoy wends its way across the broken landscape of the central *Blessure* wasteland, a herd of battlewagons and ambulances loaded with the followers of the Crimson Saint. This twisted Aberrant preaches of a coming cleansing of the world, and that the survivors in *la Blessure* are the worthy and blessed. She brings healing to those who will accept it, offers food and shelter to the lost, and her battalion of leprous sub-Aberrant mutants eagerly engage with bandits and marauders. In return, *les Enfants Rouges* gather new worshipers from the desperate and the broken, swelling the ranks of the Saint's mutants. Tattered banners and garbled transmissions of her blood-weeping visage reach ever further across the waste, and these days there are even disturbing fan-sites and communities dedicated to her on the OpNet. Some say Aberrant cults in the Scandinavian countries are funneling supplies to her. A few conspiracy theorists claim the Æsculapian Order are the ones providing the Hospice with its medicines, willing to work with even a monster like the Saint if it means they can save more lives.

The Legions would love to destroy the Crimson Saint, but she surrounds herself with throngs of the desperate and her followers regularly split up into multiple caravans to help keep her actual location secret. Also, Æon Trinity analysts fear that killing her could spark widespread violence against all outside military and aid groups because many in *la Blessure* consider her a blessed healer. Their current plan is to increase the number of Æsculapian Order clinics and mobile facilities, and to have the personnel attempt to plant seeds of doubt about the Crimson Saint.

Breach One began not as an enclave but as an observation post. Positioned by the ruins of Belfort, near the Swiss border, the encampment started as a combined UN/Æon Trinity effort to analyze and understand the bizarre phenomena wracking the town's remains. The nature of the *Esperanza* disaster, and the means by which it spread so much Quantum Flux, remain topics of serious research, but a few locations like Belfort underwent far stranger transformations when chunks of the station's core landed on them. Here, the fabric of space-time buckled and bent, inexplicable energies danced out of the earth, and the air filled with flickering afterimages and brief whispers — as if the population and the buildings were still there, intact, only briefly superimposed onto the frame of reference of the observers. The outpost soon became the center of a growing enclave as survivors sought out the steady flow of supplies brought to Breach One, and surviving French scientists gravitated towards it. Relatives of those who were in Belfort at the moment of its transmogrification gather here too, watching the juddering phantasmagoria of the town's ruins in hope that, just maybe, their loved ones have survived. Even the scientists of the Æon Trinity cannot yet say whether any such continued existence the Belfort citizens possess may be a miracle or a nightmare.

CRIMSON CONGREGATION

You can find additional details about *les Enfants Rouges*, the Crimson Saint, and her Crimson Leper sub-Aberrant mutants in the *Æon Æxpansion* (p. 101).

THE COAST

On the western seaboard, and a few toeholds on the south coast, France still clings to existence. Spared the worst of the disaster, the communities here hold onto a scant stretch of uncorrupted land and intact infrastructure. The harbors are much diminished since their glory days, denied the lifeblood of commerce that once flooded into the rich nation. Now vast shipyards and container ports lie dormant and rusting, and metroplexes are hollow shells with a fraction of their former population. Most of the survivors simply left, seeking a better life elsewhere. The poisoned seas and bleak inland vistas offer little to hope for.

Still, a hard core holds on and, slowly, the coast recovers. Scavengers and relief expeditions regularly pass through the seaboard ports, the former seen as vultures and the latter as naive — but the locals swallow their pride and take the money of both. Bordeaux is the new capital of France by default, serving as the seat of the provisional government. By dint of its significance and relatively intact infrastructure, the city has absorbed a large number of refugees and is perhaps the closest thing to normality left in the nation, although existence there is always tenuous. The flow of food and other supplies is unreliable, rationing is in effect, and the city's outskirts are a grimly tempting target for wasteland raiders and sub-Aberrant packs.

Under the leadership of a panel of representatives, the provisional government oversees the fragile reconstruction of France. It's a slow and laborious process; frustration, grief, and the resurgent recollections of PTSD fill the halls of power. Everyone is scarred. Everyone hurts. No-one survived the fall of the *Esperanza* whole, not really, not even those who now rule.

Recent successes bring a sense of fresh hope. Cooperation with Italy and the Æon Trinity is opening up new lines of aid. The UAN has just started a new financial support program intended to help get what's left of France back on its feet. The strange anomalies of the wasteland might just play a part in its salvation, as interested parties across the globe now look to exploit the bizarre phenomena reported by scavengers and might just be willing to pay handsomely for the privilege.

THE WALL

They call it the Wall, but it's not just *one* wall — it's many walls, many barricades and barriers, many riverbanks and mountain passes watched by callous eyes. The Wall is the symbol of France's modern plight, its imprisonment by its former fellows. The country's land borders are processing centers and refugee camps huddled in the shadow of perimeter fences and defensive ramparts.

Brutally gutted of its heartland, the surviving population of such a major European country was an overwhelming flood in the first days and weeks following the disaster. Innumerable survivors still hang on in the refugee camps, subsisting on international aid as grinding, resentful bureaucracies slowly work through Corruption quarantines and relocation schemes. Many camps have essentially become permanent new enclaves, albeit ones of poverty and a total lack of self-sufficiency. Wasteland survivors look on the refugee camps with a sense of pity and superiority, even as the refugees view those who remain in *la Blessure* as utterly mad or contaminated brigands.

Crime and smuggling are rife along the wall. The desperate are fertile ground for exploitation. Human trafficking is common, often delivering clients into lives of further misery or slavery. Slowly, however, a new sense of community emerges in the camps. New militias patrol the muddy streets between prefab blocks and dole out rough justice to troublemakers and Aberrant cultists. The representatives of the provisional government establish local councils to oversee administration of the larger enclaves. A disturbing new development, though, is the *Droit Gevaudan*, somewhere between franchise and protection racket. Thugs from Peyre-en-Aubrac hire themselves out to refugee camps, and those who pay are largely safe from sub-Aberrant mutant attacks.

PARIS, CITY OF ASHES

The famed City of Light, once a marvel of the modern world and a heart of learning, is now naught but a city of ashes. Suffering a direct hit from a significant portion of the *Esperanza's* mass, most of the city is an enormous wound in the earth. In places, newborn canyons of rubble, twisted metal, and mud scar the ground. Swathes of the city are glassy, undulating fields. The farthest flanks of Paris still play host to the skeletons of buildings and broken streets, but so much of the city is simply *gone*, reduced to a barren desolation.

Though radiation levels remain high, the city is not empty. Mutant packs prowl its outskirts, scavenging whatever they can to survive — and often turning to cannibalism. These creatures, possibly with the help of true Aberrants, erect bizarre temples to various Aberrants, including one that seems to be dedicated to Divis Mal. It isn't clear to what extent the mutants and mad scavengers living here are cooperating, but it is clear that they seek to keep all outsiders away from the city's warped heart.

TREASURES AND TRIALS

In the first months following the disaster, bold scavengers and recovery teams attempted to enter Paris. Many died there among still-glowing ruins, stalked and slaughtered by mutants or falling to Corruption. The survivors found none of the treasures they hoped. Indeed, they couldn't even pick sites of former national importance out from the rest of the flattened landscape. There was simply nothing left.

Some adventurers did not return entirely empty-handed. Reports taken from the scarred, trembling investigators revealed the existence of uncharted phenomena across Paris — anomalous events that no one could explain. The old city may be gone, but something new grows from its razed flesh. Despite the continuing dangers and remoteness of Paris, it is the densest concentration of abnormal conditions created by the disaster.

Energy discharges lance up from the ground in particular spots, melting wells of glass down into the earth. Plant life has sprung up in several locations roughly analogous to pre-disaster parks, but in grotesque and twisted shapes — becoming enormous vines that thread through wrecked buildings or folding around empty pockets of air for no obvious reason. Some places scour the senses, draining color from sight and leaving the lungs gasping for oxygen. A lone doorway somehow stands intact while the building around it has fallen; anyone walking through it finds themselves suddenly, violently tumbling from another doorway on the other side of the city.

Phenomena grow increasingly dense as one approaches the heart of Paris. On the *Ile de la Citie*, where once the ruins of Notre Dame cathedral sat between the flowing arteries of the Seine, a strange landmark rises from the glassy plain. The earth and rock buckles up into almost organic threads, forming an incomplete hemisphere — a dome of tormented stone and dust. Here, over the old Point Zero, the place from where France judged all distances to stem, satellite imagery reveals incredibly potent swells of Quantum energy. What lies within the dome remains a mystery, but it is to this place that the city's made and twisted residents, regularly come in pilgrimage.

A concerning theory deep within the halls of the Æon Trinity is that this formation is the direct handiwork of the Aberrants, perhaps the entire reason they threw down the Esperanza in the first place. Its purpose may remain unknown, but even aerial photographs of the dome leave the viewer with a lingering sense of dread.

INDIA

The largest member of the Bharati Commonwealth, both in land mass and population, India is a dominating force within the union. This rarely sits well with the other Commonwealth partners, but political alliances between these erstwhile allies prevent India from being able to dictate the path of the Bharati Commonwealth.

This wouldn't have always been true. Before the Aberrant War, India's population of around 1.4 billion people dwarfed that of its future partners. India had nearly six times the number of people as its closest partner and rival, Pakistan. India was a powerhouse of democracy and international influence in the mid-21st century, a nation that didn't need the support of its geographic neighbors to survive.

ABERRANT-FUELED PROSPERITY

The beginnings of the Aberrant era solved many of India's problems. Overcrowded cities demanded

staggering amounts of food, water, and other resources to function. They produced endless supplies of garbage and refuse in return. India embraced the introduction of nova-engineered crops and water solutions that reduced their reliance on China not damming the rivers that flowed through both countries. Hyperfusion plants gave clean energy to the nation with such abundance that India's recycling and reclamation centers stayed ahead of the waste generated by modern human existence.

The growth of the first OpNet with super-fast processing and transmission connected India's booming information technology sector to the world. Large swathes of the international film and television industries relocated to the subcontinent to take advantage of the growth and modernization. India still housed over a billion people, but the transformations of the pre-madness Aberrant era gave well-paying jobs to most and raised a huge portion of India's poor out of destitution.

For decades, India enjoyed status as an international political leader. Its large population gave rise to many novas through simple probability. Unlike some other nations, many of India's novas stayed in the country, or returned after they'd gone abroad for training. India's prosperity meant that its novas didn't have to move away to enjoy the fame and wealth their peers enjoyed elsewhere. With so many novas dedicated to their homeland, India's strength and importance grew even faster than before.

CULTS AND GODS

In what would eventually prove disastrous for India, the population shaped their cultural expectations and identity around the novas. These super-powered beings weren't just celebrities and heroes, many began to see them as prophets of higher powers or avatars of divine beings themselves. Many cults formed around Indian novas, despite the reluctance or discomfort this initially brought some of the creatures. Unfortunately, most bought into the narrative of their somewhat divine status, accepting the worship and adoration of the neutrals around them. Their egos flourished with hundreds or thousands of people awaiting to directly hear their every uttered word, while millions watched via OpNet cast and wished they were as favored as the disciples with direct access to the god.

The Indian government walked a fine line with these novas. The politicians and authorities were unwilling to alienate the powerful beings who brought favor and prosperity to India's people, but were also nervous about the fanatics and other extreme personalities attaching themselves to people with such tremendous influence. Without ever directly confronting its concerns, the government entered into a satisfactory arrangement with the novas, gifting them land and properties in more remote areas away from the bulk of India's population. This suited both sides; the Aberrants regained some small measure of privacy, with only their immediate followers accompanying their moves, while the government regained focus and productivity from the city-dwelling masses away from the distractions of the everyday appearances of gods.

END OF THE ERA

As the gods descended into madness and the Corruption energies that powered the once-human monsters overwhelmed their sanity and restraint, increasing numbers of Aberrants around the world enacted terrible crimes against the people who had once revered them. They became ever-more divorced from humanity and saw neutrals as irritations at best, enemies and vermin at worst. More Aberrants lost control of their powers as they pushed their limits in their quests to grow and evolve. Accidents became negligence became deliberate acts of destruction, and always humanity paid the price.

With so many Aberrants within its borders, India wasn't immune from the monsters' growing instability. However, surrounded by devoted worshippers, content with their luxuries and seldom called upon to push their powers to the limits, India's novas hadn't fallen to the temptations of power as quickly as those playing superhero or rapidly pursuing power for its own sake. When the Aberrant War began, less than a quarter of India's Aberrant population had descended into madness. The more human of the avatars even worked to keep the excesses of their peers under control, as they didn't want to lose the luxuries provided by the people and government of India.

India couldn't remain immune forever, but as Aberrant-inflicted terrors rocked the world, it wasn't these inhuman monsters who first shattered India's growth and murdered so many of its people. The Indian people remember that when the world turned and the Aberrants fell into Corruption-fueled madness, China was the one that devastated their nation.

The first bombardments hit the Aberrants' remote and easily-targeted homes in India's rural and wilderness areas. The monsters who survived

quickly moved into the cities believing that the human shields would prevent further attacks. The tactic worked for a moment, and the strikes fell silent while India held its breath. Unfortunately, Corruption had eroded the minds of so many of the monsters, who previously lived surrounded by adoration and worship and came to expect all humans to treat them as divine beings. These creatures had no barriers stopping them from seeing the humans around them as tools to use as they desired. Their rage and sorrow at neutral ingratitude also whipped the Aberrants into a frenzy. No one today knows whether the Aberrants knew that the attacks came from outside India, but they now had millions of humans to vent their anger against. The power-mad monsters ignored or overpowered those few novas in their midst with enough residual humanity to try and stay their peers' Quantum appetites.

These enraged and aggressive Aberrants murdered and corrupted the Indian cities' populations in grotesque displays that couldn't help but catch media attention and worldwide outrage. As Aberrants wallowed in their rage and increased their threat to the world, China struck again — regretfully concluding that the human populations that unwillingly shrouded the Aberrants were already dead, as the monsters would slay everyone as soon as their use came to an end. Barrages of Chinese warheads from mainland, naval carriers, and orbital strikes impacted the population centers, wiping out millions almost instantly and destroying or severely weakening the Aberrants. Without humanity to shield their Corruption, Chinese gunships and airborne platforms hit the exposed Aberrants with overwhelming firepower. Dozens of Aberrants died in the strikes, their threat eliminated, at the cost of millions of human lives. The tactic was devastating to the Indian population, but it worked.

THE ULTIMATUM AND AFTERMATH

China's actions in India directly led to the nation's willingness to issue the Earth Strike Ultimatum at the War's crescendo. India's devastation also convinced the Aberrants that the Chinese were not bluffing when they issued the Ultimatum. Without that devastating first strike the threat of a final strike may never have worked, and the outcome of the Aberrant War may not have been in humanity's favor.

Scholars speculate that the Indian strike also set the scene for the nations of Earth to continue to exist as nations, and not survive under a single Chinese empire. These academics believe that China's self-loathing at realizing the suffering its decisions and weaponry inflicted on the Indian population was a turning point for why the post-Aberrant world isn't under Chinese rule. They reason that if China hadn't devastated India, and if the Chinese people hadn't seen the impact of suffering, the nation's government wouldn't have surrendered control of the world's orbital platforms after the Ultimatum, and would have used the power to enforce its dominance over the world.

Indians take cold comfort that their sacrifice may have paved the way for a brighter future. They experienced the deaths of hundreds of millions and the shattering of their security and economy. To the Indian people, the apocalypse is still too recent, and the price was too high. For now, China can't offer sufficient restitution to account for it, and perhaps they never will.

SURVIVAL AND ALLIANCES

The first strike was the largest contributor to India's suffering, but it wasn't the only one. The Possessions Crisis and OpNet Crash effectively wiped out what remained of India's manufacturing and information technology sectors. With the nation already mourning the death of nearly half its population, the loss of infrastructure and collapse of its economy brought India to the brink of annihilation. Famine, disease, and instability set in. More people died in massive waves with untreated epidemics sweeping through the starving population. India's population was now less than 700 million and few of these survivors held much hope that their lives would continue much longer.

India's neighbors — often its traditional rivals and enemies — extended offerings of aid and support for the devastated country. Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and others had all suffered from China's first strike doctrine, but none to India's extent. The populations of those neighboring countries had been less effusive in their welcoming Aberrants into their cities. The creatures lived in remote areas of those countries — much like India — but when China struck those strongholds the monsters fled rather than moving into the populated areas. Even away from their

largest cities, the attacks hurt the various nations, and no one had a sufficient breadth of resources to survive. Each had a little they could share and a lot they needed. Working together they could pull through, pooling resources to help their citizens, and importantly, combining their remaining military might to fight off the periodic Aberrant incursions into their devastated nations. Few of these countries liked India but all agreed that none wanted the chaos born from its collapse while they already struggled. Placing survival ahead of pride, India accepted the aid and contributed whatever it could to the alliance, planting roots of what would grow into the Bharati Commonwealth.

RECONSTRUCTION

The path to rebuilding the nation began during the Aberrant War, not afterwards like so many other countries. To most of the outside world, India was a blasted, broken place. Outsiders may have wanted to assist but most were fighting Aberrants at their own doorstep. Some nations who were less engulfed by the fires of war did help. Australia, New Zealand, and other countries in the South Pacific possessed historic British colonial ties to India. Spared from the worst effects of the war, these nations were thus able to pour considerable aid into India and the burgeoning Bharati Commonwealth. These nations sent whatever funds, supplies, and experts they could spare to help the country get back on its feet.

India's reconstruction benefitted greatly from the advanced construction and production technologies developed before the Aberrants descended into madness. Although humanity destroyed millions of remote-capable devices and tools to survive the Possessions Crisis, much of the surviving technologies still provided incredible advantage over older methods. The Indian population still suffered and mourned, but they understood the assistance of other nations only bought them so much time. If they wanted to survive, they had to act to reclaim what was theirs.

The Indian population had halved but with food, water and medicinal supplies coming in hundreds of millions of able-bodied people contributed to the rebuilding efforts. Agricultural fields quickly sprouted with essential high nutrient crops, targeted construction planning and engineering laid new, efficient accommodation and rebuilt infrastructure to reconnect Indian cities and regions to each other and the world. India would never be the same as it once was, but it would come through the destruction stronger than ever before, with a more united regional focus.

MUMBAI

The gateway to India, the hub of the nation's wealth, once home to Bollywood and its booming entertainment industry, and largest city in the nation. Mumbai was also the city most devastated in the Aberrant War, and for decades held the unwanted record and fame of having the greatest devastation in a single strike in terms of human casualties and property destruction. Here Aberrants quickly abandoned their ploy of hiding among the neutral population and began rampaging, seeking vengeance against people who hadn't sought to hurt them. With so many monsters concentrated in one city, murdering whomever

ABERRANT STRONGHOLDS

China's strikes destroyed many Aberrant compounds in India's remote areas, but not all. Several technologically oriented novas built large-scale cloaking devices or force shields around their homes. Others simply had enough personal strength to weather the storm of high explosive power, with some saving just themselves while others protected their followers as well.

Of those who survived the first attacks, a minority chose to remain rather than flee to the cities. The devastation appeared so total, and the Aberrants who deserted their strongholds attracted so much attention within the cities, that China — or other forces — didn't divert many resources towards confirming that none of the enemy remained in the wilderness.

Humanity believed that even those Aberrants hidden away from India's neutral population had left Earth with the rest of their kind after the Ultimatum. This was never proven, but adventurous and foolhardy people tell stories of the Aberrants' treasures still hidden in the mountains and forests, waiting for discovery. If such tales are true, surely the Aberrants would have left traps or advanced and lethal security systems behind as well. And explorers who do manage to uncover the location of a former divine stronghold had better hope that the god is no longer in residence.

they could, China struck with overwhelming force. Nine million people died in less than an hour in China's final strike on India, which appeared to kill all the Aberrants as well. No one ever thought an event could trump this tragic loss of life, until the *Esperanza* obliterated Paris and its surrounds.

A CITY REBORN

Residents have redeveloped Mumbai so thoroughly in the decades since the Aberrant War that few scars of its destruction remain. Those that do — memorials, remembrances, and shrines — are scattered throughout the city in strategic locations to ensure the people never forget the lessons of the past.

Much like a phoenix rising from its ashes, Mumbai reestablished itself as the centerpiece of much of India's modern wealth and power. It doesn't hold India's Bharati parliament buildings, which sit in New Delhi near India's internal parliament, but everyone knows Mumbai is where the driving force behind most of India's political maneuverings originate.

A city originally built around its deep water harbor and shipping industries, Mumbai still serves as a gateway into India, but it has less importance as a shipping hub for the Commonwealth as numerous other ports throughout member countries can bring in goods and distribute through land routes without attracting customs or excise charges between members. India's Commonwealth parliamentary representatives petitioned strongly to build the Trimūrti space elevator in Mumbai and make the city a rival for Sydney's multi-modal transport hub. Other members disagreed and formed a voting bloc to instead construct the space elevator in Sri Lanka. The troubles and controversies surrounding the project have since made India thankful that it doesn't have the constant visual reminder of the expensive failure on its shores.

Mumbai still derives considerable business from its harbor through tourism. The reconstruction efforts stabilized the city and focused on restoring — or enhancing — its beauty. The trade-focused port received a facelift transforming it into an attraction for tourists to not only visit but to stay and enjoy, with a selection of some of the city's best restaurants, bars and museums relocated out of the inner city.

BUSINESS AND WEALTH

The harbor and waterways focus on the tourism industry, but inner Mumbai looks towards India's other big business and financial industries. As it was before the Aberrant War, Mumbai is home to India's Central Bank and key stock exchanges and houses the headquarters or outposts of many multinational metacorporations — including a massive multi-block enclave belonging to Orgotek.

India's preeminent scientific institutions also make Mumbai their home, drawing talented minds from around the world to India to study, research, and engage in scientific debate. This concentration of brilliance was one of the reasons Proxy Bhurano decided to establish her psi order's headquarters in Mumbai. The Chitra Bhanu compound, which also served as its primary research clinic, still stands even after the destruction of the psi order. In fact, when the other orders accused the Chibs of collusion with Aberrants and destroyed those they portrayed as rogue psions, Mumbai stepped in — backed by the might of the Bharati Commonwealth — and insisted that the compound now belonged to the Indian people. Mumbai's population has not forgotten when outsiders killed so many Indian people because of a threat only they could see. They couldn't act fast enough to stand

THE TRIMURTI EMBARRASSMENT

Within the Bharati Commonwealth, members level considerable criticism on India for the collapse of the Trimūrti Construction Corporation and relocation of its assets outside the Commonwealth before legal action could take place. India was certainly vocal in its objections to the build taking place outside its borders and moved to block various checks and balances within parliament out of petty spite. While these jealous and obstructionist behaviors did allow the TCC to escape the scrutiny that might have otherwise revealed the project's flaws before it was too late, no one has uncovered evidence that India contributed to or facilitated the failure. Other members of parliament still press for investigations, mostly as a tactic to keep India off balance and unfocused on other political elements of importance to the other members. If anyone did manage to find proof of India's direct involvement in the debacle, it would be disastrous for the nation and could lead to severe sanctions from the Commonwealth, perhaps including having its voting power curtailed, or even exiled from the Bharati Commonwealth and forced to fend for itself.

against the combined psi orders before they descended on the Chitra Bhanu, but their forces could insist that the outsiders cease further acts of aggression on Commonwealth soil. The presence of China's Ministry psi order only increased India's resolve.

The other psi orders protested, but in the face of stubborn refusal from the Indian governments, and quiet negotiations from the Æon Society, they capitulated. Common rumor says that the psi orders only backed down because they recovered nothing of interest in their initial seizure of the compound. Others speculate that part of Orgotek's motivation for establishing such a large corporate presence in Mumbai is to continue to keep an eye on what happens with the Chitra Bhanu compound.

Regardless of decade-old rumors and speculation, Mumbai's government maintains the Chitra Bhanu headquarters on behalf of India and the Bharati Commonwealth. Authorities rarely permit any but maintenance workers or the occasional police inspection to enter the buildings, but youths and foolhardy tourists sometimes trespass onto the compound in pursuit of thrills. These intruders rarely linger long, nor do authorities when they need to enter. People who visit report that the quiet, solemn buildings impart a feeling of unease, and the impression that they constantly watch the intruders and urge them to leave before something disastrous occurs. Despite the compound's haunted reputation, it

SILENT VISITORS

Surviving Chitra Bhanu sometimes visit the compound they once called home. They are very aware that the other psi orders watch the location for any hint of the Quantakinetics' survival. These Chibs ensure they thoroughly cloak themselves to avoid detection before entering and, so far, no outsiders have noticed their presence. Bhurano ensured all data and items of importance were gone from the area before the psi orders struck. Nothing except memories remain within the compound; Chibs only return to remember the fallen and refocus on their purpose.

These hidden Chitra Bhanu are not responsible for the strange feelings that others receive when they enter the compound. As far as the Chibs can tell, the haunted impressions are aftershocks of the Doyen noetic bomb echoing forward and backward through time.

CAT AND MOUSE GAMES

Rogue Chitra Bhanu aren't the only hidden residents of Mumbai. When China struck, at least three novas survived the blasts and went into hiding. Each of these novas retained empathy for the people around them and none possessed insanity-inducing levels of Corruption. They also all had the power to "dorm down" their powers — placing them into a state of dormancy and giving the appearance of being human.

These novas helped with the reconstruction efforts (as "humans") and have kept themselves hidden within Mumbai's vast population for decades. They police each other and rarely indulge in their powers anywhere near the city, though the constant temptation remains.

These Aberrants aren't aware that some of the surviving Chibs have detected their Quantum signatures in those times of indulgence and are silently investigating the presence to uncover whatever threatens Mumbai and humanity. The necessity of quashing powers for prolonged periods and living with constant paranoia about discovery greatly hampers both sides, but the Chitra Bhanu are slowly closing in. Even the Chibs aren't sure what actions they'll take if they do identify the source of the Quantum spikes.

has remained silent — but well maintained — since the psi order's eradication.

The Bharati Commonwealth also has many of its more important economic institutions in central Mumbai to take advantage of proximity to India's premiere industries. The Commonwealth Mint and central stock exchange manage their business on behalf of all Bharati nations from Mumbai, although the parliament is careful to keep other aspects of the Commonwealth's institutions and power distributed, in part to prevent over-investing in India at the expense of other members, and partially to ensure that another event like the Chinese first strikes can't cripple the collective.

THE NATIONAL SPORT

Cricket had long captured the heart of India. The sub-continent inherited the game from British overlords in the days of colonial rule, but Indians embraced the sport and made it their own. In the days before the Aberrant War, even through the rise of the novas when most organized sports suffered a lack of public interest in favor of power-wielding humans, India maintained a keen focus on cricket.

The nation was the center of the international cricket community, earning billions in revenue from the sport and investing almost as much into the community to identify and train future champions. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, when relationships between the nations who would become the Bharati Commonwealth were at their most strained, they shared a common language of cricket and ensured national teams toured and enjoyed fierce but peaceful competition.

When the Middle East suffered crippling financial woes from the rise of hyperfusion and the collapse of the oil market, the International Cricket Commission desperately sought to move its headquarters from Dubai. Mumbai was the obvious choice. The ICC had barely settled into the new corporate location when the Aberrant War ignited, and city bombardments began.

When India stabilized after the devastation with the help of its international neighbors and friends, the population needed something to help boost morale and maintain hope. The attacks damaged but didn't destroy the ICC building, and India's relief efforts prioritized restarting the national sport — after rebuilding infrastructure and securing food, water, and housing for its people, of course.

Today, India is again the hub of international cricket, overseeing official competitions, rules updates, and regulations around the world. Each member nation of the Bharati Commonwealth enjoys domestic leagues as well as Commonwealth-focused competitions. The Commonwealth also regularly competes with modern nations who inherited a passion for the game, most notably the Austronesian Union and the United Republic, but also Oceania from descendants of its Caribbean members. These close relationships through this shared passion carry more meaning than simply sporting ties. The cricketing ties build secondary political links and quiet diplomatic channels that the nations deploy away from the prying eyes of the UN and Æon. None of the cricket nations believe these organizations have ill intentions, but the countries take solace in having backup political allegiances should the world again follow a destructive path.

The Karagian twins' famous moonwalk, without spacesuit or craft, served as the first of many miracles of the Nova Age. The display marked the beginning of an ongoing nova-assisted push outwards from Earth to the stars. This same effort led to the first permanent settlements on Luna in the 2030's. First came the mining and scientific research settlements in Mare Humorum, followed shortly afterward by the NASA-built Olympus, the British Camelot, the Russian Yeltsingrad, and others.

Low gravity and its effects on the human body set the biggest barrier to full colonization. New medicines and treatments could alleviate the damage, but until the development of stable, easily maintained artificial gravity (in the form of grav crystals) in 2043, workers and scientists had to regularly rotate in and out. Grav crystals made it possible for residents to stay full time, bring their families, and build proper lives. Less than a year after this paradigm shift, Selene Miller became the first human to be born off-world.

The Space Brigade struck the first blow of the Aberrant War when they declared dominion over the Lunar surface in 2056. Their initial assault cost several colonists' lives and would have been worse had Selene not directed others to safety. Having grown up in Olympus as a naturally curious child, she knew all the nooks and crannies and how to access ducts and spaces between or behind the walls.

Selene led them into the Persephone hydroponics complex, the primary source of food on Luna. Here, the survivors of the initial attack established a no-contact truce with the Space Brigade. The Aberrants maintained a somewhat-benevolent dictatorship for the remainder of the Aberrant War; following the Chinese Ultimatum, a little over 100 of Olympus' residents left with them for the stars.

BUILDING AND REBUILDING

Following the Exodus, with Earth able to reach Olympus again, residents rebuilt the damaged areas and then expanded outwards. They established new settlements across the surface and turned smaller bases and facilities into proper colonies. People moved to the Lunar settlements to start over, some having lost everything, or unable to run far enough on Earth's surface alone. The poorest took mining and support jobs and lived on the upper levels, generally under inadequate shielding as the few surviving nova-built domes were too advanced for anyone to reverse-engineer. The wealthiest built at the lowest and safest levels, decorating their mansions and condos with holographic "windows" for lack of any better options.

That all changed in 2107 thanks to the efforts of ExtraTerrestrial Concepts and Orgotek. ETC released mylex, a clear glass-like material sturdy enough to stand up to the abuses of exposure to space while reducing cosmic rays to a tiny fraction and blocking everything else but visible light. Two months later, Orgotek released their own biotech version, simply called bioglass — creating a friendly rivalry that persists to this day.

The development inverted the established building philosophies. The richest moved to the surface where now they could have the beautiful space views they dreamed of. The upper-classes then built upwards, taking advantage of humanity's technological command over gravity to perform architectural feats impossible on Earth. Rising costs forced surface workers down to the lowest levels, which became slums in most settlements. Olympus' lower levels were the exception, restored by the Vor V Zakone to appropriate decadent splendor for the syndicate's leadership.

ACROSS THE CRATERED SURFACE

When most people on Earth think about Luna, their first thought is Olympus, but while it's by far the largest Luna settlement, it's far from the only one.

SCHRÖTER VALLEY

Aberrants destroyed the original Persephone center in 2108, but by then a larger facility was already in progress. The current facility, named Persephone II, consists of almost 300 farms under mylex domes. The farms process Lunar crust from the bottom of the massive valley, finding rich soil from millennia-old lava eruptions, and with that soil grow 80% of Luna's food supply. The bubble-like farms are pressurized and insulated and having hundreds of individual smaller farms mitigates loss should anything compromise some of them.

Persephone II was the first major endeavor by the Lunar Advisory Council (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 64) after the creation of the ULPF and the VER teams. The colonies collaborated on the construction and financial efforts, and today automated cargo

crawlers take the crops to Olympus for processing and redistribution. Members of the Æon Trinity's Neptune Division handle the day-to-day operations.

Boltzmann Crater and Rimæ Focas

Boltzmann Station, built into Boltzmann Crater's lava tubes, makes up the largest settlement outside the Lunar Advisory Council's authority. In the spirit of frontier towns of humanity's past, Boltzmann Station values its freedom and resents interference. Rather than accept the Council's authority and open themselves up to the President's more subtle manipulations, they hired a security firm to manage things. The Boltzmann Security Consortium handles the business of government, settling disputes between the corporations and other entities and maintaining services.

Many mining companies including Comstock Heavy Ores, Hunhao Radioisotope Supply, D'Anconia Interplanetary Industrial Development, and others, keep offices in Boltzmann (while maintaining contacts in Olympus). They mine both Boltzmann Crater and Rimæ Focas with little oversight and have done so for as long as humanity has had a presence on the moon. The LAC investigates rumors and concerns, but they have no functional jurisdiction. The Æon Trinity has laid in a prior ownership claim on Rimæ Focas based on an old UN surveying mission to better access (if not outright control) the site, but thus far the legal matter remains unresolved. A lot happens in the mining complexes that remains hidden from prying eyes.

Boltzmann Industrial Launch Systems, the local spaceport on the northern rim of Boltzmann Crater, serves as an inexpensive means of bringing in materials from the Asteroid Belt and sending cargo to and from Earth. Specializing in automated cargo launching and receipt, BILS has functioned for over 30 years, and during that time they've strictly kept to Olympus' safety standards to help maintain customers' confidence.

Mare Humorum

The first wave of colonization included the Sea of Moisture, a 400 km plain. The colony started as a scattered mix of individual scientific and mining pursuits, and now Humorum Station has become the largest Lunar colony complex outside of the Mount. The Station's 16 residential levels are entirely underground, with administrative, ULPF, and VER offices under new mylex and bioglass domes.

The colony's Prange-Logan sector resembles an Earth suburb, a mix of residential neighborhoods, markets, and shopping malls. Another, Mokhaeddir, has become an off-world enclave for Muslims and other former residents of the Middle East who've left their Aberrant-ravaged homelands for a new life among the stars. French expats and refugees are establishing their own sector, formally called Maison sur la Lune, in the wake of the *Esperanza* catastrophe. It's still in its early days, and a number of corporate contractors and "friendly" Russian builders from Olympus have maintained a presence to get their hooks into the desperate fleeing upward.

Major corporations like Amalgamated Business Interests, Kelvin Innovations Alliance, and Stavros Weapons Designs are major presences in Mare Humorum. In fact, ABI recently relocated its offices from Olympian Towers to a private facility in the Sea of Moisture where it can more easily watch its oppressive mining towns. KIA is a hotbed of speculative science, home of particle accelerators and orgone accumulators alike, along with the solar system's biggest Tesla coil (800 meters wide and 40 meters tall) as part of thus far unsuccessful attempts to beam power through Luna's weak magnetic field. Stavros' manufacturing complex produces cheap, reliable, and lightweight personal armaments. In theory, such weapons should be perfect for self-defense but mostly end up in the hands of criminals and gangsters.

Oberstufe

ISRA's main headquarters on the Lunar surface, often called "the School," resisted joining the Lunar Unity Agreement (LUA) out of a desire to be left alone. It's not even part of the LAMP system (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 64) and is only accessible via private landing pad. In a heavily concealed facility, not unlike a monastery, experienced clears teach advanced techniques and study particularly mysterious visions.

The School has austere but comfortable sleeping chambers, a hydroponics garden, and meditation chambers. The Order's vitakinetics maintain a medical clinic on-site. It's also one of the few surface structures with a tunnel to Huruf al-Hayy (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 146) for those ISRAns with the clearance to know about it.

Lebedev Crater

The Lebedev Penal Colony, also called the Gulag, is the biggest Russian commercial presence on Luna. The prison is privately run, contracted to hold criminals for LUA-member sectors and independents, and

maintains an armored hopper service for prisoner transport rather than connect to the LAMP lines. The Æon Trinity has confirmed over multiple investigations that the prison is safely and humanely run. In the colony's 30 years of operation, it's only suffered two reported riots and no successful escapes.

MARE AUSTRALE

Mare Australe, also called the Southern Sea, is slightly southeast from Humboldt-Barnard Station and 300 km northwest of Lebedev Crater. The region is heavily layered with craters, narrow crevasses, and folds of collapsed basalt that have made a nearly unmappable 500 km-wide stretch of badlands. It's dotted with small, independent, self-policed settlements and villages that are nigh-impossible to find with visual or sensor scans.

It's a great place to hide if you can keep your head down. There's no ruling body for the residents who dig down into the craters or purchase domes big enough for a few buildings, but there is one unspoken rule: Don't draw attention. Locals strongly encourage anyone who might cause enough trouble to draw ISRA's attention to go elsewhere.

The area is surprisingly resistant to Aberrant infiltration. The residents' paranoia combined with a thorough knowledge of the badlands' twists and turns means that they swiftly notice new and strange

LUNANET

The OpNet, for all its technical capabilities, can't casually sustain a network across space. As a result, the LAC maintains LunaNet (sometimes called the "L-Net"), that serves as a network available primarily to those sectors covered by the LUA. Wired and wireless access are accessible in any member stations on the network (and, to a limited extent, Blueline LAMP stations and on the trains themselves). Outside access is rare, extremely expensive, and tightly controlled to maintain the integrity and safety of the network. Some corporations and stations, particularly Boltzmann, have worked out a long-distance service arrangement, but those are few and far between.

SUBJECT: CONFIDENTIAL MINERVA COMMUNIQUE

From: P

To: Ben Parnell, Grandstaff Consulting

Encryption: RPH/x9

Transmission type: Self-deleting textfile

Date: 6.9.2118, 4:00pm

There is reason to believe Councilmember Thomas Mather's life is in danger for defying the President on the security bill vote. Get your team to the Bottleneck by 3:31pm tomorrow. Watch out for the man in the orange vest, he's a watcher but is not a direct threat.

Focus on making sure he gets home okay. You're about to win a drawing for Redline vouchers, they may be useful. Once Thomas is home, things should be fine.

Become the Light

neighbors. When the locals are unsure if they can deal with the problem, they are more than willing to contact Lunar authorities to exhibit laser-like focus on a major problem and turn a blind eye to the rest.

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Mine shafts both active and abandoned are popular spots for explorers and treasure hunters. The Space Brigade held near-total control of the Lunar surface for decades, and many of them built their own little lairs and nests. Every now and again thrill seekers and surveyors stumble over a relic or a chamber left over from the occupation. On increasingly common occasions, Aberrants hiding out on the Lunar surface go searching for remnants of the Space Brigade, not to mention any number of cultists and mutants looking to make a name for themselves or prove themselves to their Corrupted masters.

The distributed nature of the Lunar population, combined with the oppression of the lower-class workers, allows for plenty of opportunities for Aberrant Cults to make inroads. Some workers are willing to make whatever Faustian pact they must to free themselves of an abusive supervisor or executive, and the nature of mining operations in the middle of nowhere makes it easy to get prospective recruits alone. In addition, there are rumors that some of the older companies, Comstock Heavy Ores in particular, made their own deals with the Space Brigade for creative use of their mineshafts during the war. Buried beneath Luna's surface are seeds that could still bear Corrupted fruit.

OLYMPUS

The modern Olympus began as a small mining facility in the Galatea crater, neighbored by Camelot and Yeltsingrad. Over the last near-century since their founding, Olympus has expanded and joined with Camelot and Yeltsingrad to create something like a vast Earth arcology. Over time, Olympus has become the moon base shining down on Earth as imagined by the 20th century's visionaries and science fiction writers. It still represents a gateway to the stars, with all the glamor that implies.

The Lunar Advisory Council keeps most of Olympus functioning smoothly. It's comprised of elected officials from each of the member sectors and colonies that have signed the LUA. While the Æon Trinity doesn't directly manage any aspect of Lunar governance, they make the effort to befriend as many of the councilors as possible. The Æon Trinity's quiet oversight becomes helpful when organized crime or the obstinance of local law enforcement in a sector produces difficulties in getting the ULPF to intervene.

Police surveillance is easy enough in Olympus, given that the entire settlement is enclosed. Security cameras monitor public corridors at all levels, with varying degrees of coverage and discretion. The ULPF closely watches Upside, the Mezzanine, and the tourist traps of Downside, using cameras discreetly incorporated into the architecture to survey public areas with virtually no blind spots (except for Olympian Towers, see below). Human officers assisted by advanced SI agents monitor the feeds, prioritizing high-traffic areas in Yutu Yinchon, International Center, and Luna Park.

Coverage gets spotty below the surface and into the sublevels. From the lower Mezzanine down, the cameras are more obvious and less advanced. There never seems to be enough in the budget to update the older cameras when everything "important" is happening up on the surface. Thanks to irregular placement, the sublevel cameras miss a lot of nooks and crannies and alley-like side passages. Cheaper police SIs monitor activities with predictable (and exploitable) algorithms.

Approaching the Underworld, increasing numbers of cameras are empty shells that have been stripped for spare parts. Mesh networks run by criminal factions like the Vor V Zakone and Kanra (see below) co-opt the few that still function. The ULPF's awareness of the lowest levels is based on who benefits from the attention.

UPSIDE

The original mining facility, now dubbed Old Town, still produces a sizable percentage of the FSA's mineral resources. There is an ongoing tug-of-war between the FSA's administrators trying to modernize and update the facility, and the locals trying to maintain the historic site's aesthetic, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that it offends so many of the sector's upper-class residents. The proposed renovations would require shutting down the facility for a time and include possible replacement of workers with robots, both of which mean layoffs. Miners and support staff are fighting tooth and nail to hold onto jobs at one of the few mining concerns on Luna that pay in actual currency rather than scrip.

Olympian Towers is as glitzy as Old Town is scruffy. This playground of the rich was, and continues to be, a joint venture between the FSA and China. They share jurisdiction over the towers and domes that are home to holovid stars, powerful executives, and UN diplomats. The UN's presence means that the Second Legion's troops bolster an already extensive private security force. Between said private security and agreements between both countries to heavily monitor all public areas and outlaw all firearms (even authorized security and law enforcement only carry tasers and webguns), the Olympian Towers are probably one of the safest places to live in settled space.

Yutu Yinchon began as a Chinese-exclusive sector, but the necessities of expanding the spaceport led to diversification. This has resulted in the creation of neighborhoods like New Midwest, Neo-Berlin, and Lagos Town. Young Chinese nationals with dispositions too troublesome for their home country often find convenient job opportunities at Yutu Yinchon's spaceport and affordable apartments in Little Hong Kong. The spaceport, which handles over a third of Luna's off-world traffic, sits at the center of a sprawl of hotels with great views and offices or storefronts for every business that works in shipping, transportation, or importing.

Yutu Yinchon is also one of the rare districts that crosses between levels, reaching down into the Mezzanine. The transportation and shipping companies that ask fewer questions are on the subsurface levels, where they're less obvious and pay lower rents. They're also conveniently closer to nightclubs and dive bars where all social classes can mingle, and nobody would blink twice at a young Stavros executive sitting a table over from the VVZ captain who manages the smuggling at Wroclaw Spaceport.

Distinct from traditional Lunar construction, Olympus' tourism department refers to Bire Lubuto as a "slice of Earth on Luna." Ovoid domes cover terraformed sections of the Lunar surface with bright green lawns and sandy paths lined with tall, healthy fruit trees. Orgotek and Biosystems both provided elaborate biotechnological assistance in building the terraformed and hydroponic wonder that is the neighborhood. It's a haven for artists and creatives, though some feel constrained by the snobbish opinions of the more elite among them.

The Qin maintain an embassy in Upside, tucked away along the edge of Olympus and connected by umbilical tunnels to the rest of the station. In their distinct style, their complex is entirely biotech, grown from transported prefabricated sections from their homeworld. The only human technology in use seems to be grav crystals and holovid displays, with everything else — life support, power, shielding — produced from their own biotech. They've traditionally kept to themselves, and no humans have ever received a tour of the entire facility. As time has gone on, they've ventured into Olympus more and more to partake in UN meetings, socialize in Yutu Yinchon, and even venture as far as parts of Downside to experience human art and culture.

MEZZANINE

The International Center's 50-story dome (with a second dome underneath as a backup) covers most of the Mezzanine. Virtually every nation has an embassy here alongside a vast number of corporations, to take advantage of access to the United Nations and

Lunar Advisory Council offices. Morning and evening rush hours through the Bottleneck are mini crises for Olympus' transportation routing systems, but outside of those hours the center is virtually empty aside from travelers, cleaning crews, and police patrols.

Once a research station, British engineers renovated Camelot to reflect the heritage of the United Republic when it became home to the seven colleges of Oxford Luna. The buildings represent a blend of classical styles and modernity, with synthetic oak paneling and stone archways alongside burnished plasteel and mylex windows. Student housing is located in what's left of the drab original facility, whereas the rest of the sector allows residents to wrap themselves in the culture of their forebears.

Ukiyoshi is a technological mecca, a window into the advanced hardtech splendor of Nippon. Those few Nihonjin who leave the home islands find they can only truly relax in the surroundings of a district that outsiders find overstimulating. Many clairsentients avoid Ukiyoshi altogether because of the distracting sensory assault, but Qin from the embassy find it fascinating.

Crossing district barriers, but based in the lower Mezzanine, the Büyük Ailemle criminal syndicate challenges the Vor V Zakone's influence in the upper levels. Their merit-based advancement system gets consistent results from their agents in Olympus and elsewhere. The "Great Family" knows they can't shake the President's power base in Yeltsingrad, so the factions maintain peace via truces and tribute.

DOWNSIDE

Peligroso is the hub running through Downside, starting in the lower parts of the Mezzanine and reaching all the way down to the Underworld. It's a sector of fusion generators, service conduits, and transportation tubes. Some of the lowest-class housing is tucked away in this industrial center where few go unless they must. It's one of the lower areas that the ULPF patrols before the "private security" of the Underworld takes over.

Meanwhile, Luna Park remains a popular spot with residents and tourists alike. The amusement park surrounds a museum that exhibits every stage of Lunar development, from the original Apollo missions to the Mare Ingenii jump ship base. The park is similarly themed with rides, games, stage shows, gift shops, and restaurants that extol the virtues of Luna. The recently opened Luna Resort and Casino provides rooms for guests with views of the Olympus skyline or the park itself, and a variety of games, diversions, and a venue for popular performers. Even the employee housing is a step above what's found elsewhere in the sector.

Lejanas is a newer residential sector with small but clean and inexpensive apartments that also links the Mezzanine to Luna Park and Camelot. Sokotown, near Yutu Yinchon, is home to several small businesses, markets, groceries, and family-run restaurants. Wroclaw adjoins both the International Center and Ukiyoshi. Even though Wroclaw Spaceport is only a third the size of Yutu Yinchon's, its proximity to Beaulac Clinic, and its alliance with certain business figures, creates a lot of traffic.

Beneath the UN portion of International Tower and Olympian Towers, Castelo Nova and Vila Real are blue-collar residential neighborhoods, but as one travels downward this is the first sector featuring stores that take scrip (sometimes called "moonbucks") from the less reputable companies. Fado, while a little on the grimy side, is a popular spot for creatives of all sorts that feels like an energetic artistic commune. It especially attracts slumming artists and those that don't fit the "refined" tastes of Bire Lubuto.

Downside also houses much of the Mount's criminal element outside of the VVZ hierarchy. The Hotbloods deal in drugs, chaos, and violence in roughly equal measure. Primarily made up of disgraced socialites and their companions, they work for Earth-based factions who desire Lunar yuan without Lunar problems. The Vikings are much more

SO, WHAT *IS* THE PRESIDENT?

Everyone has a theory about the President's true nature: She's a psion, or an Aberrant, or one of the proxies, or various political figures, or a Nihonjin AI directing masked stand-ins. The rumors get even wilder from there, and not even her lieutenants know for sure.

Her exact past and identity are a mystery for Storyguides to determine for their own games, but by default she's a particularly brilliant, skilled, and ambitious Talent more than capable of keeping ahead of what Luna can throw at her.

specialized, dealing primarily in illicit weapons and explosives that other factions don't want to touch.

The Bao represent more "respectable" crime, styling themselves as neighborhood protectors containing the excesses of other groups. They collect their protection fees from local businesses with an unerringly polite demeanor and distinctive leopard print clothing, armbands, or tattoos. Kanra, made up of hackers, spies, and information brokers, can find out almost anything anyone (even law enforcement) wants to know, for a price. They have no qualms about dealing to multiple sides of a conflict, since ongoing rivalries mean regular customers.

UNDERWORLD AND THE PIT

Much of the Underworld's reputation comes from Invierno Cansado, home to the least fortunate of the menial workers and miners in and around Olympus. Companies that pay in moonbucks instead of yuan sweep through, picking up anyone desperate enough to work a mine shaft for a week or two. Few of the local stores and vendors even list prices in yuan, subtly reinforcing that this is where these oppressed workers "belong."

Vila Jacinta is much nicer, all imported tile and brightly colored trees and plants collectively maintained by the criminal underworld. It's neutral ground, good for shady deals and territory negotiations, and about as safe as Olympian Towers. Criminals from Earth get a taste of home from a variety of quality ethnic restaurants.

Originally a service conduit between Olympus and Yeltsingrad, the eight kilometer long Corridor was expanded to its current 70-meter diameter by the Space Brigade for unknown reasons. Today it's lined with street vendors and panhandlers looking to make a moonbuck (or maybe even a yuan) off anyone traveling to and from the Pit.

The Pit earned its name following the wealthy residents' flight to the surface, when the ULPF abandoned it to become a war zone of gang activity, violence, and misery. The President established order and rebuilt, and now the Pit meets some definitions of high-class. The criminal masters of Luna live in decadence alongside their casinos and questionable business operations.

The President still encourages the nickname, though — after all, if you displease her, you vanish into the Pit and never come out.

NIPPON

For 50 years, Nippon was a nation under glass. The rest of the world could watch the islands' transformation from low orbit or tease clues from electromagnetic emissions, but Nippon spoke only from behind the mask of Makaro-Shima. An uncompromising arsenal enforced territorial limits. By the Aberrant War's end, the death toll of would-be aggressors and refugees alike starkly underlined Nippon's demand for isolation, and the rest of Earth had more immediate concerns through the following decades of recovery.

The unattainable has always beckoned. In the 2090s, the arcology nation's mystique captured global imagination, from Ngai Lemieux's *White Halls/Red Walls* series of retrofuturistic roninpunk holopics to the innumerable OpNet forums in which conspiracy theorists amplified one another's hyperbolic speculations. Government interest also rose as surveillance showed increasing energy generation coupled with ecological restoration of the islands' surviving wilderness areas.

On July 17, 2105, the quarantine ended, and the world leaned forward in anticipation. The mask dropped away only to reveal a veil beneath. Nippon's reunion with the rest of Earth was on the nation's own terms, revealing only a painstakingly constructed official image. Recent years have seen chips and cracks mar the sanctioned façade, but Nippon, by choice, remains in the wings of the world stage.

YESTERDAY'S FUTURE

Nippon is human space's undisputed hardtech leader. Across information technology, cybermedicine, mega-engineering, robotics, renewable energy, and naval architecture, Nihonjin *keiretsu* (corporate alliances) are years ahead of their rivals. Only in fields where the quarantine prevented involvement, such as astronautics, does Nippon cede the throne to other nations.

When the quarantine ended, the *keiretsu* re-entered the world economy through canny exchanges of patents and controlled invitations to foreign investors. The resulting influx of capital swelled the previously dormant Nihonjin economy. The boom of the 2100s led to a wave of expansion in the 2110s, which

THE TIES JAPAN CUT

The mid-21st century economy was so globally integrated that complete withdrawal was akin to national suicide. Nippon survived only through economic control so rigorous that it made history's most ardently autocratic nations look downright *laissez-faire*. Even so, the numbers don't add up. According to all rational analysis, the nation should have collapsed within a few years. How Nippon managed to not only survive but thrive during the quarantine, emerging mostly prepared to rejoin the world markets when the government let the *keiretsu* off the leash, is 22nd century economists' equivalent of physics' dark matter problem.

Another seldom-discussed issue is the Japanese citizens who were studying, researching, or working abroad when the quarantine took effect. Many returned home but not all were willing to abandon their lives at the sudden command of distant bureaucrats. Many applied for immigration or asylum wherever they were. Entire branches of Japanese corporations merged with foreign companies or reorganized as employee-owned ventures.

Today, the descendants of these stranded citizens form expatriate communities that have little in common with Nihonjin culture in Nippon. These communities' highly visible psions make them aspirational destinations for Psi Nippon members. Just as bad, from the Nihonjin government's perspective, are the legal battles between "loyal" *keiretsu* and expatriate splinter companies. In 2119, a World Court ruling allowed Australian Seikei Aerospace to absorb its Nihonjin counterpart based on the Nihonjin-Australian CEO's status as the sole descendant of the parent company's prior owners. Since then, both Nihonjin-descended foreign citizens and other corporations have attempted similar lawsuits to reclaim property lost to their forebears during the quarantine.

Ironically, some of this property is in the hands of non-Japanese-descended Nihonjin. As literal and figurative islands of relative stability, pre-quarantine ports were prime refugee destinations. Authorities turned away many but relaxed entry standards for those who could demonstrate skills or wealth that the nation would need through the coming decades. This resulted in minorities disproportionately occupying Nippon's upper economic strata despite a lack of cultural acceptance that continues today.

is only now leveling off as competitors catch up and the market's desire for Nihonjin novelty fades.

Despite its current prosperity, Nippon's course is toward economic irrelevance. Around the world, biotech is supplanting hardtech. It's an out-of-context problem for the entire Nihonjin knowledge base, from universities to bleeding-edge corporate labs. *Keiretsu* interested in entering the biotech market must establish offshore subsidiaries outside government oversight... to say nothing of overcoming their own xenophobic mistrust of alien technology. In this transformative field, Nippon is now a generation behind and receding farther every day.

For the moment, though, Nippon remains an exemplar of the future that humanity expected and desired before the emergence of the psi orders. If it no longer stands alone on the cutting edge, it's still in rarefied company. The gleaming hardtech purity of the arcology nation remains the heart of its prestige and public image, and this ubiquitous technology defines modern Nihonjin culture.

NATION WITHOUT WALLS

Nippon is a surveillance state. To an extent, this is a survival imperative. A closed artificial ecosystem supporting 99 million people requires constant monitoring to ensure environmental quality, structural integrity, and resource distribution. Automated systems manage much of this, even maintaining themselves in cases, but human oversight and intervention remain necessary for both routine maintenance and continuous upgrades. Nihonjin environmental engineers are in high demand across space industries and the extrasolar colonies.

The other imperative driving the Nihonjin panopticon is ubiquitous social control, legislated and accepted through fear of new Aberrant eruptions. Even before the quarantine, rigid social mores were evolving to further reinforce compliance in an already conformist culture. Today, the indefatigable SIs known as the Gentle Guides watch every Nihonjin citizen for signs of behavior detrimental to

the Nihonjin state's common good. For minor infractions, they intervene without human oversight. Few citizens remember a time before the Guides could ping a personal agent to issue a polite reminder of law, policy, or custom.

For outright criminal behavior, the Guides alert the local police. Medical emergencies likewise receive instant attention from emergency services. The Guides forward greater offenses, and signs of Aberrant or psionic activity to the Special Police, the law enforcement and counter-intelligence arm of the Public Security Ministry. Agents have broad latitude in discharging their duties. While policy directs the Special Police to use a soft touch unless circumstances mandate otherwise, there are persistent rumors of dissidents being un-personed — exiled to the White Sectors via deletion of their identity records — or summarily executed. Most Nihonjin choose to ignore these tales. After all, this system is what keeps them safe and comfortable.

SHALL NOT HARM

Ubiquitous automation is concomitant with ubiquitous surveillance. The Nihonjin robotics industry has all but eliminated the service sector. From arcology repair to food preparation, SIs are eerily adept at anticipating human needs, often without actual communication. Humans are creatures of routine and software is very, very good with regular schedules (and the occasional recognizable irregularity). True AI remains out of the question — the 2071 Kumamoto Singularity Incident still evokes superstitious dread — but SIs intended to regularly interact with people are adept with natural language and simulated emotional responses. Anthropoid robot designers have learned to steer clear of the Uncanny Valley, opting for styles that remain artificial yet relatable.

Surrounded by artificial servants, Nihonjin don't actually need to interact with other humans to address their basic needs. A small but growing segment of the population does just this, fear of the outside world having evolved into fear of *all* human contact. This is often comorbid with other mental illnesses, as aversion to Gentle Guide intrusion compels people to avoid situations that could trigger the social correction algorithms. With the government subsidizing basic needs as an essential element of running the arcologies, and without a high demand for labor, these "invisible folk" are free to live and die alone.

On a personal level, Nihonjin children are socialized by their minicomps' agents as much as by their human teachers, and the agents likewise adapt to their humans' development. By adulthood, Nihonjin citizens interact with the arcology datasphere as naturally as breathing, their personal agents silently informing the surrounding service SIs of their humans' preferences to create seamless comfort. What few consider is that their omnipresent digital confidants are also the Gentle Guides' first source of behavioral data.

The Environmental Safety Commission handles robotic and SI security concerns. ESC oversees SI research, design, and implementation and enforces the prohibitions on AI. It also monitors the monitors, ensuring the arcologies remain habitable and addressing dangerous malfunctions. Additionally, ESC is the front line of Nippon's struggles with the Unchained and similar hacktivist groups, and it investigates other crimes involving the misuse or subversion of SIs and robots. Deliberate sabotage horrifies most Nihonjin, who have an existential dread of their artificial environment turning on them, so ESC enjoys strong public support.

THE WHITE SECTORS

The plans for the transformation of the Japanese archipelago into a fractal of arcologies assumed indefinite isolation and failed to account for the trends that have driven negative population growth. Nippon's infrastructure could support over twice its current population without further development. Vast swaths of some prefectures are untenanted. To reduce maintenance demands and conserve resources, habitat managers idle or mothball the vacant levels and untenanted megastructures. These are the White Sectors: officially empty, invisible to the public, dead to the people and systems who keep the arcology nation running.

Life, as they say, finds a way. Nippon has its share of citizens who reject the arcologies' precise, ordered existence, or who've been cast out. No one knows how many rogue settlements flourish in the White Sectors but they're certainly in the hundreds; the total undocumented population must be several million. Moreover, they're the one demographic whose birth rate is high enough to drive growth.

Fortunate settlements can bootleg power and water, hack automated support systems into autonomous mode, and otherwise force the disconnected areas to support them. Those less fortunate must barter services for survival or take necessities by force. It's an artificial frontier lit by peeling lumipaint. It's also sanctioned on a deep policy level. The Nihonjin

government could make the White Sectors completely uninhabitable, but they serve as a relief valve for the disaffected. By allowing a subsistence level of resource theft, Nippon ensures that only those truly unsuited to mainstream society will flee to the White Sectors, and once there, the constant grind of daily survival means they won't have time or energy to cause too much trouble. Undercover agents and embedded monitors keep tabs on true threats like Aberrant emergences and runaway geothermal taps.

Everyone knows the White Sectors exist. The tamer rogue settlements provide illicit entertainment and gray-market goods and services. From petrofuel motorcycle endurance races to suppressed history books to blood sports, there's something for everyone. Every prefecture has a few passages that the authorities haven't gotten around to closing off, and the occasional raids on the more proscribed gatherings do little to deter the adventurous.

Since the quarantine lifted, the White Sectors have become more of a security problem, one with which the Nihonjin government is still grappling. Empty coastal arcologies are border vulnerabilities which smugglers and infiltrators exploit. Rogue settlements also communicate with the outside world, and their living conditions relative to the rest of Nippon are raising humanitarian concerns at the UN. Further, there's mounting pressure (led by an uneasy alliance of Australia and the United Republic) for Nippon to settle European refugees in its surplus arcologies.

ISLANDS WITHIN ISLANDS

The popular image of Nippon portrays an entire archipelago under one roof but a glance at satellite imagery shows that's not the case. Even amidst the technofetishism that characterized mid-century planning and subsequent development, Nihonjin retained reverence for nature and practical awareness of a functioning biosphere's benefits. Decades of arcology life have led all right-thinking Nihonjin to prefer their nature simulated and sterilized for their protection, but large preserves still exist in the islands' interiors. After the arcology's completion in 2079, their restoration became an Imperial priority and is still ongoing today.

The desire to experience nature is a strange compulsion for modern Nihonjin. Arcology life's benefits are so ingrained and self-evident that unfiltered air and sunlight and uncontrolled plants and animals (and insects and micro-organisms!) hold an alien unpredictability and veiled threats of sudden overstimulation. Many citizens choose to experience these through VR telepresence or linger longingly at viewports overlooking the vast arches and conduits that channel rivers and migratory routes through or under the arcologies.

Actually *going* outside is another matter entirely. Willingness to do so isn't quite classed as a psychological disorder, if only because some human workers are necessary to patrol the preserves and manage the natural ecologies. However, there are no rogue settlements in Nippon's wild places. Nihonjin who work outdoors often lie about their jobs to avoid evoking horrified fascination. Paradoxically, food grown or raised in natural conditions and prepared by human master chefs is among Nippon's highest luxuries.

POWER PLAYERS

Nippon's mere survival through the quarantine (to say nothing of its transformation) was no easy feat. Four major power blocs worked hand in hand to manage this. The alliance was often uneasy, but all parties recognized its necessity. Today, though, each group has its own vision of Nippon's future and its relationship with the rest of humanity.

THE DYNASTY

In the decade before the Aberrant War, the pace of change and the nature of the threats facing it (to say nothing of several novas elected to the Diet, Japan's bicameral legislature) overwhelmed the Japanese government. With the legislature and cabinet paralyzed, the need for a capable and decisive leader was apparent. The constitutional changes that restored chief executive powers to the Imperial House were a least-bad solution born of desperation.

Empress Yuzuki was the right woman in the right place at the right time. A former JSDF armor officer who'd served in UN peacekeeping missions and later earned a systems engineering doctorate before her unexpected accession to the throne, the "Warrior Empress" swiftly unified national opinion and drove further reforms. She and her inner circle placed the nation on a war footing and began planning a modern command economy, laying the groundwork for what would become the quarantine.

Today, Nippon remains a constitutional monarchy, but Emperor Kazuhito is the actual chief executive, not just a ceremonial head of state. The Diet's legislative power remains, albeit checked by the Emperor's will. The Ministers of State, on the other hand, serve

at the Emperor's pleasure and have no executive authority beyond that which the Emperor grants them.

Tennō Heika (His Imperial Majesty the Emperor) appears in public rarely and only in environmental filtration gear, as he suffers from Total Allergy Syndrome. He is a capable head of state, but his condition forces him to delegate many of his duties to his niece, Crown Princess Riko, and other scions of the Imperial House. Most of the family follows the Emperor's conservative and measured approach to foreign relations and domestic change, but a few firebrands of the Crown Princess' generation are frustrated by the opportunities that Imperial policy keeps just beyond reach.

THE MILITARY

Japan's Peace Constitution was another casualty of the Nova Age. Today's Nihonjin military remains primarily defensive, but its force projection capabilities are on the rise. Moreover, its commander-in-chief is again the Emperor, though service members swear oaths to Nippon, not the Imperial House. Because of its historical criticality to the quarantine and its ongoing protection of Nihonjin sovereignty, the military enjoys both robust popular support and significant political soft power. Its current leaders favor rapid expansion to ensure Nippon can protect its growing foreign interests and defend itself from both the renascent Aberrant threat and the new possibility of psion aggression. The latter strategic goal creates ongoing friction with Australia, which is otherwise Nippon's closest military partner.

The Ministry of Defense contains the Nihonjin Army, Navy, Air Force, and High Fleet. The Army is a capable urban-combat force but lacks proficiency in large-scale maneuvers. The Navy and Air Force have been strong territorial defense forces for generations; while they retain this mission, they now suffer from growing pains. The Nihonjin military established its tiny High Fleet in 2116 for space commerce protection and is still getting its feet under it. Overall, the Nihonjin military has extensive theoretical knowledge and is highly professional, but its long isolation has left little room for real-world experience. It also has trouble recruiting personnel who are willing to deploy outside artificial environments, which has led to unprecedented reliance on autonomous weapon systems. The only exceptions are vacuum assault and reconnaissance gear (VARG) troops — most Nihonjin recruits are far more comfortable with the idea of fighting in natural environments if they can do so within the secure embrace of a cutting edge VARG.

The Ministry of Public Safety's Special Police and the Ministry of Infrastructure's ESC also have their own paramilitary forces for high-threat enforcement actions. To a casual observer, both are indistinguishable from the Army. Less well-known are the Audit and Inspection Force (the Ministry of Economy's enforcement arm) and the Special Collections Unit (the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication's equivalent of Project ReWrite).

THE MERCHANT PRINCES

Nihonjin *keiretsu* and corporations refer to the quarantine as the "Chrysalis", a period of inward-looking transformation. When Empress Yuzuki severed the nation from the global economy, the only way for Japan to avoid apocalyptic implosion was total collaboration across all economic sectors. Brilliant planning, inspired improvisation, and orchestrated deregulation made this possible — but only barely. No corporation emerged unscathed; stockholders lost fortunes. The archipelago's arcological transformation created some new opportunities, but Nippon remained a closed system.

The *keiretsu* that formed during the Chrysalis didn't know when their isolation would end, but strategists maintained constantly updated plans for re-entering the world. After the Aberrants returned, theirs were the loudest voices calling for emergence. Today's corporate leaders are ravenous to regain the power and prestige their grandparents lost. With national survival no longer on the line, competition is increasingly bloodthirsty. Corporate espionage and security are growth sectors, while an increasing number of legislators are on the payroll to forestall new regulatory measures.

THE OTHER MERCHANT PRINCES

Nova Age deregulation also revitalized the then-flagging Japanese organized crime world. The Yakuza's relationship with the public had always been complex. Major clans often crossed the line into legitimate business, even operating charities and engaging in relief work after disasters. Framing themselves as *ninkyō dantai* ("chivalrous organizations"), the Yakuza swiftly aligned themselves with Empress Yuzuki's agenda. Their long-standing association with the construction industry positioned them as the power behind the nation's arcological transformation.

Today's clans still exist to give the people what they want. They're the masters of the White Sectors and the gray markets. In arcologies where public services are

deficient, they take up the slack. They've evolved beyond legitimate business. In some of the arcology nation's sectors, most visibly the Feral City of Yatsushiro, they're the quasi-legitimate government. They openly control little, but their influence is everywhere.

BRIGHT CITY, BIG LIGHTS

Capital, showpiece, cultural heart of a nation, portal to the world, 450 square kilometers and two-and-a-half vertical kilometers of arcologies housing 14 million people: This is the Tokyo Sector, Nippon's crown jewel. By daylight, it's a glittering sea of glass and steel; by night, a neon maze of planes and angles.

Designers rebuilt most of Nippon's 45 prefectures to a single arcology plan, repeated to the horizon. Tokyo, one of the last completed, incorporates examples of every other prefecture's design as well as a number of unique megastructures. The result is a super-urban landscape more varied in appearance than anywhere else in the arcology nation. Like all Nihonjin arcologies, each of Tokyo's sectors is self-sufficient, able to maintain its essential functions after an earthquake, tsunami, or Aberrant raid, regardless of the damage to neighboring structures.

In addition to being the Nihonjin seat of government, Tokyo is also the sole legal point of entry for non-Nihonjin (other commercial ports have limited service sectors but don't allow international travelers past those areas). Because of the concentration of Imperial and corporate offices here, it's as far as most need to go to transact their business. This makes Tokyo a national presentation piece for foreign relations.

URAGA

Tokyo's international and interplanetary transportation hub is the Uraga Complex, which includes the separate Yokosuka Seaport, Uraga International Airport, and Miura Spaceport facilities, as well as the arcologies that support them. After decades of decay, it's undergoing intensive renovation and expansion to meet the needs of new international trade. Uraga was once Tokyo's largest White Sector and its newly displaced rogue settlers are becoming major problems for the arcologies around it. The authorities work hard to keep this problem invisible to visitors.

TOKYO BAY WEAVE

Composed of dozens of floating hexagonal arcologies, the Weave covers the former Tokyo Bay as far south as Yokosuka Seaport. Each arcology is two kilometers across at the base, but that's where the similarities end. Hundreds of designers from across Nippon vied for the right to showcase their work here, and the result is a lattice of mega-architectural competitive excess. Giant shock-absorbing hinges connect the individual arco-islands while damping

STORYGUIDE TOOLKIT: NIPPON

The **Trinity Continuum: Æon** setting incorporates many different science fiction tropes. Nippon reflects the 1980s' dystopian cyberpunk future, with humanity eclipsed and transformed by technology that threatens to dominate its masters. It also incorporates the same era's vision of Japan as a technological superpower. Yet the quarantine evokes the Tokugawa shogunate's *sakoku* policy of isolation, and the post-Nova Age Nippon enjoys certain advantages (see **Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 366, if you're the Storyguide) that have more in common with anime superheroics.

These varied influences allow the Storyguide to tune Nippon based on what she and her players want it to be. Nihonjin fear and hostility toward the psi orders can position it as an adversary, yet the Nakamura Process opens up the possibility of allies whose capabilities complement the psions'. You can spin the arcology nation's ubiquitous surveillance and automation as dystopian or benevolent, depending on what sort of stories the group wants to tell.

excessive wave action, and flexible transport pod tubes, pedestrian bridges, and utility umbilicals link the structures at, above, and below the sea's surface.

With a large portion of each arcology dedicated to the hospitality industry, the Weave is where Nippon encourages most foreign visitors to stay during their time in Tokyo. A heavy Special Police and ESC presence here ensures guests are safe — and, not coincidentally, keeps tabs on visiting psions. As a last resort in case of Aberrant attack or other trouble, security forces can disconnect, flood, and scuttle each arco-island.

CHIBA SPINDLE

This gleaming white and chrome arcology dominates the skyline east of Tokyo's core. Spread out around it, smaller arcologies house the Chiba Research Zone, Nippon's foremost cybernetics development complex. The Spindle itself is home to several cutting-edge clinics, which are Nippon's only sanctioned places for foreigners to undergo cybernetic medical procedures.

SHIROYAMA

Built on the former site of Hachiōji Castle, Shiroyama (literally "Castle Mountain") is the Nihonjin Ministry of Defense headquarters complex. Its five arcologies, constructed to resemble giant *tenshukaku* (castle keeps), extend well below ground. Although it's an administrative complex rather than a base, Shiroyama is well-defended, as the Aberrants calling themselves Chrysanthemum Razor and Red-Crowned Crane learned in 2121.

Shiroyama is the site of several embassies, notably those of Oceania and Australia. It's also home to the only foreign military presence on Nihonjin soil, a joint ARDEP detachment of advisors and a small aggressor force.

IMPERIAL PALACE

Amid the towering arcologies of the Nihonjin government center, the Tokyo Imperial Residence is a postage stamp of green under open skies. In addition to the palace itself, rebuilt in the 1960s and expanded in the 2080s, the ruling family's compound includes gardens, outdoor recreation facilities, and the support buildings for the residence's core staff. The original plans for Tokyo's arcology project called for much of the grounds to be open to the public, but the gardens often go empty, as few modern Nihonjin wish to brave the outdoors. Their most frequent visitor is Emperor Kazuhito, clad in his trademark red and gold environment suit.

The Imperial Palace remains the venue for many state ceremonies. Though few Nihonjin will ever set foot on the grounds, all are familiar with it.

MOUNT FUJI NATIONAL PRESERVE

Nippon's largest and best-known expanse of natural terrain, the Mount Fuji National Preserve is 1,100 square kilometers of cultivated wilderness. The eponymous mountain is visible from Tokyo on clear days, but the preserve's topography and vegetation are far more varied than the popular images of the snow-capped peak would suggest. Since the 2090s, ecological engineers have cloned and reintroduced most native fauna — the preserve is now home to foxes, bears, and several formerly extinct bird species.

The preserve's status isn't entirely altruistic. Since the Aberrant calling itself Delver Four entered the mountain in 2045, Mount Fuji has been intermittently active. Few Nihonjin architects want to test their arcologies against an eruption.

Oceania is a young state built on very tenuous connections between its component parts. It possesses no contiguous territory. Its cities are scattered across the map. It has no common cultural ties between these populations, born from the bosom of so many different countries. Oceania did not come together from a singular pressure or experience that affected each of the cities in the same way or at the same time. The binding thread between the pieces that make up this state is the environment — the fact that they are all cities upon or beneath the waves. Could this commonality possibly be sufficient to hold a worldwide community together?

In truth, it is not enough. Being aquatic does not ensure a strong bond of fellowship. It's common among Oceanians to view the genetic modifications of phibs and selkies as a mutual experience of sorts among their nation — but the idea that a Varunan has more in common with a Nordholmer than she does with a land-going Indian, just because both the Oceanians have gills, is a pretty shaky claim. Some see the pan-global federation of city-states as a glorious ideal, a new era of freedom from old authoritarian orders that could be a fertile test-bed for fresh ways of thinking, but the practical realization of the nation bears innumerable friction points that threaten the notion of a harmonious balance among its cities.

Yet Oceania does indeed exist, and it has, thus far at least, held together. At its heart, this is a matter of the politics of power. Each city, for the sake of its relative independence from the authority of its progenitor, finds it convenient to pretend at a global community of fellowship and common purpose. If the Varunan and the Nordholmer have nothing more in common than a Norwegian and Indian have, apart from an unusual mode of breathing, they can at least find agreement that they each want to be free from their former possessors — and that perhaps, together, they can help each other to achieve that. As the years pass, the artificiality of the Oceanian culture eases a little further. Real links between its aquatic peoples begin to emerge.

Though scattered far and wide, born from different peoples, and forged in different crucibles of independence, Oceania is on the path to slowly, truly becoming the thing that it pretends to be.

LIFE AMONG THE WAVES

Look far back enough and you'll see that humanity's ancestors emerged from the water, as some aquatics are fond of saying. It's only natural to return, with forms honed by science to be better adapted than ever before. The oceans are a wonderland, a place of incredible potential that even the Oceanians have only begun to tap into.

Humanity crawled out of the sea for a reason, others note. The oceans are turbulent, deep, and dark. Terrors fill their night-black depths. The elemental forces of the world are heedless of tiny, fragile humans, and the sea can be far more terrible than the land — tides and storms regularly test Oceania's cities with destruction. Just because someone's parents decided to get the extensive gene therapies needed to survive underwater doesn't free them from fear of the yawning deep.

The cities of Oceania are bustling centers of community and light for this very reason. Outsiders sometimes assume every selkie spends all her time gambling upon the waves, but the realities of everyday life still demand most Oceanians turn their days towards productive ends, and plenty of aquatics don't *want* to swim in the open ocean. The seas are dangerous, and Oceanian cultures have a strong focus on following the rules, going in groups, double-checking equipment, and frequently reporting in.

This tight, even fierce, sense of gregariousness strikingly contrasts with the adventurous spirit that fueled the creation of many marine cities and which still burns bright among Oceania's citizenry. With so much to explore and chart, there's plentiful employment for those who want to get away from the hubbub of the cities and search the cool, quiet peace of the sea floor for mineral deposits and wrecks from the Aberrant War. A recent cultural phenomenon of "sea-steaders" has emerged among selkies in particular, setting out to establish small prefab submarine habitats to establish fish or seaweed farms, or to prospect for minerals. The Oceanian senate encourages this colonization, seeing it as a useful pressure valve for society and a potential means to extend territorial claims across larger swathes of sea if these sea-steads persist and grow.

Oceanian wealth comes principally from favorable trade and finance terms that attract businesses, from aquatic farming, and from mining. Huge untapped deposits of mineral wealth remain beneath the waves, and Oceanian efforts are at the forefront to exploit them. Frustratingly for the senate, while

Oceanian cities often display examples of cutting-edge biotech architecture, the technology is largely the work of major land-borne corporations. Efforts are afoot to encourage and nurture homegrown biotech talent, but Oceania also faces accusations of outright poaching — leading scientists in the field from other nations. It's certainly true that desirable foreign candidates can receive generous offers of citizenship, extremely favorable terms of employment, or prestigious positions in new Oceanian institutes of learning such as Tortuga University's nascent biotechnology department. In some cases, the accusations turn conspiratorial; despite general Sudamérican support for Oceania, there are rumbles of a clash with the Norça over certain biotechnologists who have "disappeared."

Even Oceanians can take nothing for granted while at sea. In the waterborne cities, structural integrity requires constant vigilance for leaks, pressure changes, and stress fractures. Failure can be devastating, especially as plenty of Oceanians are still neither phibs nor selkies and will swiftly drown if an arcology floods. Every home and office contains emergency breathing apparatus on-hand, and safety laws ensure that underwater cities contain numerous heavy-duty "life-pods" that can detach and slowly drift to the surface, designed to run a pressure equalization process before unsealing.

Apart from the tensions of welding together people from different cultures into one coherent polity, other prejudices also simmer within the Oceanian populace. Aquas have been on the receiving end of bigotry from land-dwellers in the past, but in many Oceanian communities they sometimes reverse this situation. The popular New Atlantean ideology, fronted by demagogue Iolanda Durante, sells a form of soft condescension; it posits that on a world covered largely by water, the aquas are the superior form of humanity and the likely inheritors of the future. By comparison, unmodified humans are clumsy and ill-adapted, even if lucky enough to be Oceanian.

Unmodified humans commonly face social pressure to take the gene therapies that will convert them into an aquatic. Since an aqua can pass on her genetic alterations to her children, some aqua communities see relationships with unmodified Oceanians as a sort of benevolent patronage to raise up their future children as aquas too, rather than helpless land-dwellers. Plenty of construction and engineering jobs bar non-aqua applicants because it's not worth the additional risk and danger for other aqua workers if something goes wrong for the air-breather. Bioconservative religions and philosophies meet with short shrift in Oceania.

COMPLEXITIES AND CONVERGENCES

The Oceanians are building a new nation, and it's a deeply complex task. The surface problems that outsiders see give them only a shallow understanding of the challenges facing this nascent culture.

A Senate in Makaro-Shima rules Oceania, with representatives from each city sitting on this august body. The Senate puts important issues to the populace via direct democracy, giving each citizen a vote on the matter. This arrangement is controversial within the federation of city-states, as the largest cities dominate the lion's share of tax revenue, influence on the Oceanian Senate, and voting power in direct democratic referendums. A smaller city easily finds the long-standing cultural mores of its populace crushed beneath the preferences of the bigger settlements.

This surface problem hides deeper structural questions as to how Oceania can and should govern itself at a practical and cultural level. Currently, every city has its own code of local laws alongside the nationwide laws made by the Senate legislature. Every city has its own law enforcement structure derived from the processes, traditions, and ideals of its founding state. Sea-cities that stem from the same land state may have a synchronized legal system but, for example, Tortuga and Pacifica have wildly varied statutes. A significant number of citizens believe Oceania should have a unified ministry of policing and common legal processes across every city, but there is no consensus as to how to build it, nor which cities should serve as the model.

Questions of migration also occur. If the Oceanians are a unified people, they should be free to travel and live among any of their cities. Distances make this impractical, as do the physical limitations enforced on underwater and floating communities via finite resources of space and life support. Some city authorities simply don't want open travel at all, preferring to maintain close control over their population numbers — or harboring paranoia about infiltrators and saboteurs.

Leading Oceanians have identified that these, and many other bureaucratic and logistic problems, intertwine with the lack of common culture between member cities. Most of the Oceanian communities

still see their city and their homeland as their foremost identifiers, and other Oceanian cities as allies of convenience rather than belonging to one greater people. The solution, imposed by the Senate, is the implementation of new festivals, national holidays, and civil outreach programs across all cities in the hopes of creating new binding threads that will tie all Oceanians together.

To enact this community-building, the government has hired in expert sociologists, anthropologists, and marketing gurus from around the world, filling a new Department of Unity with special advisers. To reduce any sense by city populations that a new way of life is being forcibly imposed on them, the Department tries to weave positive elements of component cultures into the greater whole, treading as carefully as it can to avoid insulting or upsetting misrepresentations in the process.

The result is a growing mélange of cultural references and entirely new semiosis that can be confusing to outsiders — and sometimes to Oceanians, too. The newly inaugurated Varuna Day is a nationwide public holiday in honor of both the city and the god of that name; the Department of Unity is currently at conflict within itself as to whether they should encourage the religious aspect. Schools now teach a new lexicon of common tidal and nautical terms assembled from the various languages used in Oceania — something that youth subcultures have embraced because it distinguishes them from their parents' generation. Government ad campaigns expound the inferior flavors of land-grown food and run monthly focus spots on particular catches imported from other cities of the nation, hoping to encourage more trade between members and to instill a new, unique cuisine across Oceania.

Unity efforts are meeting with mixed success among older generations, and the senate is very sensitive to complaints that this "shared culture" just *happens* to draw an awful lot more from the national backgrounds of Makaro-Shima and Pearl City than the other cities. However, canny politicians are using the endeavor to counterbalance some existing grievances. The Department of Unity funds its programs generously, and divides budget up among cities equally rather than on a population basis. The Department is also quite ostentatious in its spotlighting of cultural influences from the smaller cities, and it sponsors up-and-coming talent from all across Oceania to travel to Pearl City and take advantage of opportunities in the entertainment and arts industry there. By actively sharing the wealth in this manner, the Senate's initiative slowly wins over more and more supporters.

Culture is just one underpinning of Oceania's unified future. Physical structure is a key foundation, both architecturally and in terms of population. Harnessing new resources from the seabed draws in wealth, but if Oceania is to become a stronger player in world politics, it needs the homegrown expertise and the additional labor force to fully exploit these economic opportunities.

It's easy but costly to draw in workers for major projects. These economic migrants mostly lack the aqua adaptations and Oceanians tend to view them as less efficient and more of a risk to themselves and everyone around them — and, of course, they're only temporary. Their competencies and skills depart with them. Over the years, Oceania has extensively advertised itself as an ideal new home for aquas the world over, but by this point, most of those who are inclined to sever ties to their old lands have already done so. Indeed, a recent wave of aqua refugees from France has, if anything, stirred up some resentment within the Oceanian population, just as in nations on dry land.

Currently, the Senate trials a new citizenship program intended to draw in skilled migrants, including government assistance with covering the costs for amphibious or aquatic conversion therapies. It lures in potential candidates with promises of employment, introduction and acclimation courses, and the prospect of a new life far away from any mistakes or memories that they may want to be free of. The government is pointedly willing to look the other way for criminal records or dubious histories if the possible citizen is sufficiently gifted. The program attracts criticism from without, where other nations claim the Oceanians are trying to poach their talent, and from within, where many have reservations over the caliber of some of these "reborn aquas." Poor or low-skilled applicants for Oceanian citizenship feel they're overlooked in favor of the more affluent.

The other side of the coin is the physical space available for these new Oceanians — the habitats, workplaces, and factories that might make Oceania a true powerhouse of the waves. Expanding existing cities, whether above or below the water, is a precision process of expert engineering and costs vastly more than building the equivalent amount of living space on land. Oceanians accept limited personal confines in their homes, often seeing it as counterbalanced by the immense freedom of the sea all

around. Even so, the Senate faces staggering budgetary costs just to maintain the physical infrastructure of Oceanian cities, let alone build new ones.

While Oceania does what it can to support private initiatives behind the new sea-steader movement, founding a whole new city would be prohibitively expensive. If such an effort failed, it would be ruinous for Oceania's treasury. The obvious tactic, therefore, is to continue as Oceania began — drawing in existing cities from other nations. Or, as some would put it, *stealing*.

New Tampa is the current media focus when it comes to potential candidates, with FSA accusing Oceania of actively stirring unrest in the city with agents provocateur. While some Oceanian operatives *are* at work in New Tampa, the ironic truth is that the Senate is hesitant to push the situation towards instability. New Tampa is in FSA coastal waters, and the private opinion of the Senate's defense committee is that the FSA *cannot* let the city go without a fight; it would simply be too much of a loss of territorial integrity. Outright conflict with the Federated States risks a domino effect where the Americans might decide to set the record straight on other former-FSA cities that joined Oceania, no longer fearing the chaos of war when they're embroiled in one already. In addition, New Tampa would be the first Oceanian city that could not claim the international standard of 12 miles of territorial waters since it floats within the FSA's own territorial waters.

Elsewhere, however, floating platforms and underwater arcologies are fair game for Oceanian meddling. Propaganda emphasizes Oceanian freedom of access to aqua therapies, the retention of riches that a settlement might otherwise be sending off to a distant, land-borne government, and solidarity and support when it comes to protection from Aberrants. These notions often find fertile ground. Plenty of oceanic laborers and citizens feel like the authorities have forgotten them or view them only as a number on a spreadsheet, another income stream to a ravenous budget that land-borne folk benefit from far more than those of the sea.

This Oceanian agitation has a perverse medium-term effect on new oceanic colonization. Oceania cannot afford to build new cities yet, but the world's major nations are increasingly reticent to found such installations themselves — precisely because so many have seceded and joined Oceania, taking a vast investment of time, money, and resources with them each time. Many governments have decided to pare down underwater operations to small, frequently

rotated teams focused purely on singular economic opportunities or choose to step back from maritime exploitation entirely to leave it to Oceania.

TERROR IN THE DEEP

Outsiders are often surprised to see the extensive defense systems employed around Oceanian cities. Oceanians are understandably averse to personal armaments that might breach sealed compartments or knock holes beneath the waterline and bring an entire section to a watery end. Law enforcement is usually, but not universally, demilitarized with very mild forms of nonlethal force at most, preferring negotiation and mediation to solve social problems before they ever explode into violence.

By comparison, though, the heavy emplacements that surround a city are as potent as the Senate can afford. Anti-aircraft missiles, sonic armaments, and advanced torpedo systems guard each settlement from every angle. Even hostiles with conventional heavy weaponry can too easily trigger a cascade of failures for so elaborate a structure as an underwater arcology or floating platform, and it's a risk Oceania takes very seriously. While the nation relies on the support of major allies to deter all-out war, it remains vigilant, even paranoid, over the prospect of deniable black ops attacks or pirate raids. Oceania is desperate to project an image of security and peace and to avoid looking weak.

The other cause for such extensive defenses is a threat that Oceania can't cover up and can't ignore — Aberrants. No one knows for sure how many Aberrants dwell in the seas, but the ocean depths could conceal any number of the horrors. The best-known one is Poseidon, a huge Terat already responsible for the destruction of Castor Deep, but Oceanian assets keep track as best they can of several other targets who have crossed paths with, or outright attacked, settlements in the past.

Despite the Senate's best efforts, a recent story splashed across lurid headlines concerns Aberrant activity in Pacifica. Digging down to the truth, the incident didn't involve a true Aberrant at all, but rather a group of sub-Aberrant mutants adapted to the water who managed to infiltrate the selkie community. The mutants were more interested in finding shelter and food than causing havoc or killing anyone, but it has touched off a rash of paranoia and conspiracy theories across the OpNet and through Oceanian communities. The tale has mutated; now some aquas will swear blind there are formless, shape-shifting mutants in the abyssal trenches who squirm into habitats through outflow pipes and copy the appearance of hapless victims, and that this is all part of Poseidon's grand plan. Others claim the Oceanian government itself is working with Aberrants. New arrivals to smaller, tight-knit communities find themselves met with suspicious stares.

Pirates, jealous governments, and even Aberrants are, ultimately, known unknowns. Oceania can prepare itself for these threats with rigorous intelligence operations, well-funded defense budgets, and careful diplomatic overtures. The sea is deep and dark, though, and perhaps plays host to stranger things yet.

Oceanian research and mining outposts down in the aphotic zone face frequent psychological problems among their staff, particularly near abyssal trenches. Despite all being aquatic, they still possess quite human minds, and the stress of isolation in these stygian surroundings is intense. Worse, though, are regular hallucinations and claims of bizarre phenomena in the high-pressure waters of the deeps. Sometimes, patients brought back to sunlight zone habitats and the pleasant recovery wards of Oceanian hospitals still insist, stubbornly, that they weren't hallucinating at all.

Like their sailor precursors, Oceanians are often superstitious to a fault. They eagerly, almost hungrily circulate the stories that bubble up from the dark. Ancient shipwrecks now home to intense, terrifying presences; sea-floor black labs, hosting awful experiments and ghastly crimes against humanity; things that fell from orbit during the Aberrant War, loaded with corrupted technology. Most aquas aren't afraid of large sea predators — modern technology provides plenty of solutions to a hungry shark — but the mind still invites fantastical nightmares to fill the yawning gulf of the open sea.

Some of them aren't fantasies. Reports of utterly bizarre life-forms trawled up in factory-ship nets off Chile initially spread assumptions of Aberrant activity, but now the stories have it that the depressurized carcasses weren't from this planet at *all*, and the scientist investigating the DNA of the creatures turned up dead. Oceania points fingers at the Norça, who point fingers right back. A floating pirate OpNet hub off Indonesia sank during the Aberrant War; recently, aqua prospectors in the area started to pick up garbled transmissions from the Sunda Trench's sunless reaches. Electrokinetic psions confirm that the transmissions bear the identification signatures that

the hub once used, but the contents are bizarre and disturbing. The *Voador*, a Portuguese-flagged cargo ship, vanished a few dozen miles off the FSA coastline, and FSA spokesmen speculated publicly that it was the action of Oceanian separatists from New Tampa. The ship turned up again within two hours off the coast of China, bereft of any crew but still packed with cargo. The onboard systems provided unclear data for the intervening period of time, but Ministry psions and Oceanian investigators backed each other up in their report that a sticky slime of unknown origin coated the whole ship, while the lack of any Quantum energy signatures seemed to rule out Aberrant involvement.

PEARL CITY

Pearl City is the shining star of Oceania, the jewel in its crown. Though tensions still simmer with Venezuela over the secession of the city, the favorable treaties they won in compensation have borne fruit. The city is now a major entertainment hub with a flourishing music industry, rising artistic institutions, and booming tourism, including very liberal gambling and drug laws. Although Makaro-Shima is the governmental hub of Oceania, Pearl City has become its diplomatic center. Representatives from many nations consider an assignment to a consulate in Pearl City as a real prize.

AS ABOVE, SO BELOW

While most undersea cities have some surface structures, including landing pads and weather stations, Pearl City is unusual in that it is expansive both above and below the surface. This presents particular engineering challenges, as the tides put immense pressure on such structures. Pearl City solves the problem by using biotech on a vast scale; it is a living, growing city, flexibly anchoring the floating upper levels to the firmly tethered sea-floor sprawl.

The Pearl topside is a gleaming vista of modernity. The underlying superstructure is organic biotech, a coral-like network that engineers can stimulate into controlled growth of super-tough coralite filaments, but an uninformed visitor wouldn't guess this at first glance. It's a purposeful illusion, hidden from view unless one descends to the underside of the city. There, plunging towards the sea floor in a flexible escalator shaft with transparent walls, gawping tourists witness a wonderland of opalescent hues and gleaming nacre buildings. Immense living cables thread between floating blisters of coralite habitats, their sinews gently tugged by the currents. Whole sea-floor neighborhoods, seemingly artless in their organic configurations, rise up with flanks of luminescent windows to reveal countless citizens going about their lives within.

Pearl City is a major urban center and not without its grimier side. Large waste treatment plants, submersible vehicle hangars, and power plants squat in the seabed in more mundane but very reliable forms of architecture. Cheaper neighborhoods hang in coralite clusters right under the topside platform, getting paltry sunlight through the dense urban layer above but putting low-wage workers within easy reach of employment. The new Akoya undersea neighborhood recently collapsed during construction, killing the workforce within and partially flooding; the city administration has dithered over how to proceed, while criminals use the waterlogged hallways to do business where Pearl City's enforcers can't see them.

DANGEROUS GAMES

While Pearl City is rapidly gaining a reputation for the arts and tourism, its cosmopolitan nature and relatively liberal attitude fosters some darker practices. In the velveteen privacy of VIP clubs, hosts promise rich clients that they can have *any* appetite sated. Magnates and FSA corporate heirs throw down unimaginable sums in high-class gambling dens. In derelict coralite hangars beneath the waves — and now in a relatively intact chamber in sunken Akoya — illegal fighting clubs gather crowds of seedy tourists, eager to enjoy the blood, baying crowds, and thrill of conflicted disgust from aqua prostitutes.

Oceania knows about these practices, and stamps down on them with only mixed success. Many Pearl City administrators look the other way if the treasury gets its cut of the huge bets and transactions made away from the scrutiny of land-borne nations. More exploitative operations provoke publicized crackdowns from time to time. Oceania can't afford for its crown jewel to become too tarnished.

Yet Pearl City also plays host to an entirely different kind of trouble. The accessibility of the city, its willingness to turn a blind eye, and its crowd of diplomatic envoys has made it the host to a world of espionage — a crossing point for spies and operatives from innumerable world powers. The games these agents play rarely turn to outright murder, and Pearl City is an unofficially acknowledged form of neutral ground among them. Freelancers take their leisure

among the clubs and the anemone-groves, looking to catch the eye of prospective employers. Renegades and turncoats face their former allies in tense meetings amid the city's glamorous restaurants, negotiating the terms to cessations of hostility.

A number of independent psions have set up office here as well. Most build networks of contacts and clients among the diplomats and bureaucrats by slowly proving their reliability and trustworthiness. A handful, the boldest and perhaps most talented, auction off their services to audiences of only the most select clientele. These auctions draw in private interest from around the world.

Pearl City's topside embraces them all, but hosting such people comes with risks. City security forces suspect the collapse of the Akoya neighborhood was an act of sabotage, but their cup runs over with potential suspects. When someone oversteps the bounds and *does* kill a rival, they're often extremely talented at precisely the sorts of arts and techniques necessary to cover their tracks. Mercenary psions willing to take on just about any job at the right price have a habit of dragging their metaphorical mud back into the city with them. Meanwhile, plenty of Oceanian citizens in the settlement feel less safe with all this going on over their heads. A rising tide of resentment grows among the least well-off of Pearl City's inhabitants. Intelligence operatives looking for a good time in the underside of the city are likely to find the local aquas are anything but welcoming.

SUDAMÉRICA: BRAZIL

Brazil is the largest, wealthiest, and most powerful nation in Sudamérica, and is arguably the most technologically advanced. However, it also has its share of problems. While notably less extreme than in poorer and more repressive nations like the FSA or Russia, Brazil has some of the highest economic inequality of any of Earth's prosperous nations. Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo are home to fashion and biotech multimillionaires, and people living in cramped conditions with little hope that their lives will ever improve.

The shanty towns, hunger, and illiteracy that were a hallmark of Brazil in the 20th and early 21st centuries are long gone, medical care and education are free. The nation's basic income should, in theory, have eradicated poverty — especially since people are free to earn more than this. However, most large Brazilian cities and arcologies have the dual problems of rapacious landlords who charge high rents for cramped, substandard buildings, and criminal gangs who thrive on extorting "protection" money from the poor.

Also, poor people who need loans for emergencies must often seek out loan sharks aiming to keep them in perpetual debt. Brazil's cities and arcologies attract large numbers of poor and working-class Brazilians because they offer these people the best opportunities for advancement. However, these cities are sufficiently expensive to live in that basic income payments are barely sufficient for survival.

Poor people who are both talented and exceedingly lucky can claw their way up into the ranks of the middle-class, but most never manage. Instead, their lives consist of failed dreams and a loss of hope. This economic inequality remains Brazil's most serious social problem. Although there are proposals like raising the basic income, introducing rent controls, or creating national programs that guarantee citizens a job, all these solutions are expensive and too many of Brazil's upper-classes are unwilling to pay for them.

THE AMAZON

One important source of Brazil's wealth is the vast Amazon rainforest. The wonders of the Nova Age helped restore most of it to its pre-industrial grandeur, and the activities of *Nossa Força Verde* (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 79) helped reduce and then mitigate the damage caused after the Aberrant War. Portions of it are still recovering, and a few localized regions remain dangerously blighted with Quantum Flux, but most of this vast jungle is a thriving wonder that combines millions of years of evolution and millennia of careful and deliberate management by the native peoples who helped shape it into the verdant marvel it is today.

Today, native people still live in the Amazon, but their lives are notably different from those of their ancestors. Many still hunt and gather or engage in forms of cultivation that best suit this environment, but their villages now possess locally generated electricity, refrigeration, OpNet access, and in most cases, educational holovids, entertainment programs, and advertising in their native languages. The residents of most of these isolated villages hold their

various pieces of advanced technology in common, rather than every individual owning their own mini-comp or every house having its own refrigerator. The villagers pay to purchase, repair, and replace these items through a combination of gathering and selling rare plants, acting as guides for tourists, and collecting royalties from both their herbal medicines and from valuable plants they informed ethnopharmacologists about. The income of most Amazon villages is quite modest but is often more than sufficient for their needs. Some spend their surplus on various luxuries, others send groups of their young people to visit one of Brazil's cities for a week or two, to help them better understand the nation and the world they are living in.

Of course, these tribal peoples are not the Amazon's only residents. Since the Aberrant War, more than a million outsiders have moved into this rainforest, seeking to live off the region's vast bounty. The first settlers fled the horrors of the Aberrant War and the chaos of the Crash. After Brazil began recovering, others followed. Most settlers sought a less hectic life with closer connections to the natural world, while others wished to avoid outsiders. Some of these communities consist of people who reject modern urban life, others are mystics or religious minorities, unusual subcultures, and a few disturbingly authoritarian cults (including a handful of Aberrant cults, most of whom seek to move into the Amazon's remaining Quantum Flux Zones). Many of these outsiders ignore and are ignored by the Amazon's native peoples, but some new communities trade and share with nearby native settlements. A few have begun forming vibrant hybrid cultures, where outsiders, native people, and their children now all live side by side.

AMAZONIAN BIOVILLAGES

Change is coming to the Amazon and the peoples living there. Large bioarcologies like Brasilia require years to grow to full size and functionality, and the best designs come from the Qin, who charge a premium for their technology. However, noetic biotech capable of growing into small villages and towns that hold up to a few thousand residents is far cheaper and grows much faster, since these settlements only require growing a relatively small number of one- or two-story buildings, none of which are particularly large. There are now dozens of biotech villages and towns in the Amazon rainforest, and people are growing additional ones every month or two. A growing number of native peoples have replaced their traditional villages with biovillages that provide an abundance of comforts and conveniences, while staying true to their desire to live in harmony with their environment.

Because humans created the technology used to grow these biovillages, other humans can hack it. As a result, a growing number of Brazil's urban poor seek to replace their crowded tenements with elegant biovillages, using hacked templates and matrices that allow users to grow an unlimited number of buildings without paying additional fees. While some hacked buildings fail to grow to full size or die in less than a decade, skilled hackers can produce durable and long-lasting structures. For the past five years, groups of impoverished Brazilians have been moving to the Amazon and growing hacked biovillages. Because of their isolation, there are few risks to doing so. However, some poor and working-class Brazilians wish to obtain these benefits without having to move into the Amazon rainforest.

A few determined radicals have been buying or, more often, squatting on cheap land on the edges of both Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, and growing hacked biovillages. The existence of these urban and suburban biovillages has become a major topic of discussion both on and off the OpNet. Because of the difficulty of determining exactly who is using a hacked or a legal biotech matrix, law enforcement officials are reluctant to risk civil unrest by destroying biovillages they believe to be illegal. As a result, biovillages on legally purchased land seem secure for the moment. However, most people build hacked biovillages on illegally occupied land that no one is currently using. A few months ago, developers in Rio de Janeiro ordered the local police to destroy two such squatter biovillages that sat on land that the developers wished to build on. The result was a series of marches, and then riots, that shocked this normally peaceful city. Since then, there have been no further efforts to demolish any urban and suburban biovillages. Yet, tensions continue to rise. Developers and landowners continue to urge police to enforce their property rights, while activists seek some form of squatter rights to unused land, or at minimum a way to purchase this land at a significant discount via payments they make over a decade or more. Because both sides are firmly convinced that their position is right and moral, easy answers are difficult to come by, and the Brazilian government is uncertain how to respond in the long term.

HACKING BIOTECH CITIES AND VILLAGES

Using conventional hacking to attempt to control systems like automated traffic control or emergency systems in buildings suffers a +2 increase in Difficulty. The two most common ways to get around this limitation is to either gain access to a formatted biocomp that is authorized to affect the systems the character wishes to control, or to format the system itself.

Stealing someone's biocomp is relatively straightforward, but secure biocomps, like all security-related biotech, are typically format locked so that only one person can format them. Overcoming this format lock requires a Technology + Cunning roll with a Difficulty of 5, along with a well-equipped lab for working with and formatting biotech. Also, this process typically requires at least four hours. However, anyone with such a secure biocomp must immediately report it if it goes missing. Officials then revoke that biocomp's access. In addition, if a person carrying a secure biocomp goes missing for more than 48 hours, their superiors typically lock their access until they find a way to contact this individual and learn the reason for their absence.

Either authorizing an unauthorized biocomp or formatting someone to a biotech system requires physical access to the specific biotech system, along with a specialized toolkit for formatting biotech and manipulating biotech. A biokinetic with two or more dots in Transmogrify can approximate the necessary tools and can accomplish both tasks but increases the Difficulty of all rolls by +2. If the biokinetic possesses four or more dots in Transmogrify, this increased Difficulty vanishes, and biokinetics who also possess three or more dots in Psychomorphing can almost instantly accomplish either task by spending 2 Psi points and making a successful Psi + Transmogrify roll.

CRIME IN BIOTECH SETTLEMENTS

The new biotech arcologies, cities, and villages pose some new and unique problems for both criminals and law enforcement officials. Because the infrastructure and surveillance devices in these settlements are all based on noetic biotechnology, they are considerably less susceptible to conventional hacking. Even ordinary users must either format their dwelling and office or use a formatted biocomp to gain the full range of control over systems they interact with, which adds an additional layer of security. However, noetic systems also possess several unique vulnerabilities. Criminals can steal authorized biocomps, illegally authorize another biocomp, or format a secure system.

TRANSHUMANISM AND MORPHOLOGICAL FREEDOM

For much of its history, Brazil has actively celebrated all manner of diversity, and this spirit is very much alive in 2123. Brazil was one of the first nations to protect morphological freedom. Adults are free to alter their bodies as they see fit, and this law protects them from most forms of discrimination due to their chosen physiology. As a result, Brazil has become an increasingly popular tourist destination for aquas, and its ties to Oceania have grown closer and stronger. Today, a growing number of Brazilians embrace the possibilities offered by noetic biotech. The only major social limitation is that almost everyone avoids grotesque and asymmetrical modifications that resemble the bodies of twisted sub-Aberrant mutants.

While radical transformations are rare, more than five percent of Brazil's population has some sort of visible alteration. Most are relatively minor changes like fur or feathers instead of hair or exotic looking eyes that can often see long distances or in the dark. Some older teens who wish to appear intimidating purchase fangs or retractile claws.

Brazilian law treats attacks with biological weapons like claws or fangs the same as attacks by people armed with knives or similar weapons. In addition, anyone with powerful ranged innate weapons like lasers or poison gas jets must register them with the Brazilian government, and failure to do so is a crime. However, innate grip pads, inhumanly keen senses, and most other alterations that do not provide someone with military grade weaponry are all perfectly legal.

RECONSTRUIR

Brazilians refer to the most extreme physical transformations currently available as Reconstruir (Rebuild). These physical alterations do not require either surgery or noetic biotech. Instead, a biokinetic and vitakinetic work together to alter the client's noetic template. Depending upon the desired changes, the biokinetic uses *Transformation* (• • •) or *Chimera* (• • • •) and depending upon whether the patient seeks temporary or permanent changes, the vitakinetic uses either *Restore Template* (• • • •) or *Adjust Template* (• • • • •). Using *Restore Template* in combination with Biokinesis transforms the patient in ways that persist for roughly one month, before the patient's body gradually restores itself to its previous state. In addition, a vitakinetic can easily reverse these alterations using the same power. Using *Adjust Template* allows the psions to create transformations that are permanent — unless another vitakinetic later permanently alters them.

There's almost no limit to how psions can use Reconstruir to modify their clients. Someone could become a physical and genetic duplicate of someone else (a process that is highly illegal unless the person being duplicated agrees). Alternately, the client could obtain functional wings, or become a hulking armored monster with a large biological laser weapon in the center of its forehead. The patient's head must remain large enough to contain her brain, and her body must remain mostly humanoid, but adding wings, a second set of arms, or a tail are all possible alterations.

A few of the most extreme examples of Reconstruir resemble sub-Aberrant mutants and can cause significant negative reactions, even in Brazil. However, if someone transforms herself into a humanoid jaguar or a person with macaw feathers instead of hair and functional bird wings, in Brazil they are more likely to attract compliments and envy than prejudice. There are only two downsides to Reconstruir: First, it is relatively expensive — even relatively minor permanent alterations cost Wealth • • . In addition, even the wealthy cannot endure frequent Reconstruir. Biokinetics can endlessly alter their bodies, and vitakinetics can easily endure multiple transformations, but neutrals and other psions cannot undergo Reconstruir more often than once every six months.

Depictions of Brazil in popular media from somewhat more conservative nations, like China or Russia, tend to show street scenes of Brazilian cities where almost half the population have highly visible modifications and augmentations. Also, Brazilian villains with grotesque and deadly modifications like claws that drip venom or laser beam eyes are a staple of action holovids from the FSA. Residents of most other Sudamérican nations find the focus on Brazil as the center for morphological freedom problematic because they feel it dismisses the existence of similar laws and a similar culture of both tolerance and celebration of diversity that exists in their own nations.

The widespread acceptance of physical modifications and augmentations goes beyond a mixture of tolerance and celebration. In Brazil, it also includes a widespread belief that people modifying themselves to better perform an important job or hobby is not merely acceptable, but commendable. Construction workers often possess built in grip pads, while security and law enforcement personnel frequently possess vision enhancements or improved reflexes. Also, Qin Enhancement Polyps (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 289) are exceptionally popular in Brazil, and possessing either the Lightning Calculator or Perfect Memory polyp, or perhaps both, has become almost expected for both serious students and professionals in certain fields.

As various practical enhancements and augmentations become increasingly common, Brazilians have begun grappling with how these technologies relate to issues of economic justice and fairness. Because the wealthy are able to purchase more and better augmentations, and members of the upper-class and upper-middle-class can afford custom modifications using Reconstruir-based enhancements, a growing number of social workers and advocates for the rights of the poor have all raised the issue that at least some enhancements that are valuable in particular professions should be freely available to anyone who shows significant interest and aptitude for that profession. However, while subsidies for QEP and other noetic bioapps are feasible, Reconstruir requires two skilled psions working together for several hours, and thus

is only practical as a procedure that is available to a small percentage of the population.

With augmentations that can drastically increase longevity on the horizon, and the prospect of safe methods of dramatically increasing intelligence using biocomp-based computer enhancement, the people of Brazil and the rest of Sudamérica are now discussing the fact that in a few decades their world could be divided between middle and upper-class people who are smarter, healthier, and can customize their bodies, while the poor and working-class can only afford the most minimal augmentations. While the Brazilian government prides itself on the fact that all Brazilians have had access to adequate food, shelter, medical care, and education for the last 40 years, the swift progress of bioapps and other techniques for enhancing human potential now threaten to increase the nation's already significant levels of inequality and return Brazil to the level of inequality of almost a century ago.

Brazil, like most of Sudamérica faces significant conflict over how to best address this issue. Prohibiting or limiting the ability of people who can pay for augmentations to obtain them is an idea that is gaining ground in a few other nations but is wildly unpopular all across Sudamérica. However, because procedures like Reconstruir are inherently expensive, many middle-class Brazilians worry about the taxes that would be necessary to make them freely available to everyone. A growing number of moderates on this issue suggest that the government should pay for augmentations that enhance educational opportunities for anyone who does sufficiently well on standardized tests, while businesses should pay for augmentations that directly aid work in a specific profession to anyone working in that profession. Advocates for the poor are quick to point out that this sort of meritocratic approach only serves to increase inequality. As tensions around this issue gradually rise, no one on any side expects a swift resolution.

Crime and Surveillance

Brazil is as heavily surveilled as any other prosperous nation, but it handles surveillance somewhat differently than elsewhere, especially for the wealthy and powerful. Surveillance of private property is legal, as long as the cameras and other sensors are located on public property or the owners of the property permit their presence. However, anyone who wishes to pay for the privilege can strictly limit what the authorities can access of this surveillance. Surveillance SIs always pass on surveillance of uncontained fires, weapons fire, explosions, or violent crime. However, someone who is willing to pay for their privacy can restrict surveillance SIs from reporting anything else occurring on their property to the authorities, including images of theft, extortion, or blackmail. These same laws enforce serious financial penalties on anyone who records any information about these locations without the owners' explicit permission, even if the images clearly depict a non-violent crime in progress.

Although law enforcement officers who enter these areas are free to look at whatever they wish, the teleoperated drones that law enforcement typically sends in before officers arrive automatically blur images of everything except violent crimes or other threats to public safety, like uncontrolled fires. The officials operating these drones can clearly observe anything to do with the crime or other emergency they are responding to, but cannot see details of anything else, including images of others who are present at the scene.

Most wealthy people don't bother to buy off surveillance of their property, but a substantial minority do so. Also, São Paulo and several other Brazilian cities are known to have private clubs and in one case, an entire outdoor market where successful criminal gangs have bought off surveillance, permitting them to run untaxed gambling, deal in the few drugs that remain illegal, including combat drugs like red (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 288), and in a few cases operate open markets for buying and selling stolen goods. These markets are sufficiently popular that some entrepreneurs pay a cut to the criminal gang running them to sell street food or even ordinary, legally acquired goods to tourists and others who are more likely to buy something they believe is stolen.

Paradoxically, Brazil's laws regarding surveillance makes even the infamous markets for stolen goods relatively safe places. Someone can get their pocket picked with ease, but surveillance SIs instantly report armed robbery, attempted kidnapping, or any similar crimes to the authorities. Because the criminal gangs who run these markets have no interest in local or national law enforcement showing up to deal with such crimes, they do an excellent job of policing themselves and dealing with criminals who attempt to rob or otherwise trouble them or their customers.

Journalists periodically write lurid OpNet articles about some of the most infamous markets for illegal drugs and stolen goods, but these articles lack any

images or recordings of these locations, and while some people object, others enjoy the thrill of shopping for allegedly stolen goods. Also, while only a relatively small percentage of the wealthy and powerful take illegal drugs or seek to avoid prosecution for non-violent crimes they commit on their property, a larger number wish to avoid having their illegally acquired art imaged, investigated, and likely confiscated. In addition, these same laws make certain that no law enforcement officials fall prey to the desire to make a windfall by acquiring and selling holos of someone important having an affair or being messily and embarrassingly intoxicated.

BRASILIA

By the first decade of the 22nd century, the Brazilian capitol of Brasilia was aging badly. It was still a vast and relatively prosperous city, but much of its infrastructure had decayed, and almost a sixth of the city's vast apartment complexes stood empty. The inhabitants had learned to adapt to the frequent repairs and various annoyances and difficulties caused by the city's aging buildings and facilities, but a growing number were gradually moving to other, more modern cities.

In 2113, psi order Norça approached several Sudamérican nations with proposals for creating living biotech cities. Both Columbia and Venezuela approved plans to create a handful of small biotech cities and large biotech towns to test this concept. However, Brazil's government sought to make a far bolder statement. After extensive consultation with the Norça, the Brazilian government embarked on a plan to both revitalize Brasilia and to show the world that Brazil was one of the leading nations in the field of noetic biotech. Not only would they build a vast living metropolis, but they would transform an aging conventional city into living biotech and would accomplish this in a way that allowed the inhabitants to live and work there throughout the transition.

The key to this plan was the fact that almost a sixth of Brasilia was standing vacant. To avoid displacing people while the new buildings grew, Norça noeticists and bioengineers began constructing the first sections of their new living city in Brasilia's mostly abandoned southern portions. Soon, vast skyscraper trees began replacing vacant and sometimes crumbling buildings. As these structures grew, the government provided a vast array of tours, lectures, and holovids about the new biotech city, until residents of Brasilia, and people from elsewhere in Brazil were eager to move there.

INTERNAL MOBILITY

At this point, the city government began holding a lottery for the inhabitants of different neighborhoods to move into the new biotech neighborhood when it was complete. Once these people had moved out of their previous neighborhood, the bioengineers razed the existing buildings there and converted that neighborhood into the next section of the new biotech city. Since the houses and shops were considerably nicer and better equipped, with more advanced conveniences than almost all existing sections of the old Brasilia, the city government arranged all details of moving the residents of almost all the working- and middle- class neighborhoods. These citizens were exceedingly eager to move to the next biotech sections of the city.

The one limitation was that everyone needed to move out of a neighborhood before the bioengineers could begin construction of the next portion of the biotech city. Both neighbors and social workers employed by the city helped convince reluctant individuals to move. Neighborhoods where not everyone was willing to leave lost their place in the housing lottery, so residents of such neighborhoods worked to convince everyone to move, using a combination of promises of assistance and increasingly intense social pressure.

Slightly less than a quarter of Brasilia remains to be transformed into biotech, and theoretically bioengineers should complete the city's conversion within three years. However, half the remaining neighborhoods are primarily inhabited by people who are not eager to move into a living city. To avoid disrupting their timetable, the city is paying moving expenses for individuals who wish to relocate to other cities in Brazil. Some people do not wish to move at all, and there's a small but vocal movement to not transform all of Brasilia, a prospect that most bioengineers believe could harm the city's noetic integrity, since biotech building almost entirely surround most of the remaining hardtech neighborhoods. Finding a way to convince recalcitrant residents to either move into biotech buildings or leave Brasilia is a looming problem that the city government is currently seeking help with. A few OpNet conspiracy sites claim that the Brasilia city council is considering hiring telepaths to mentally coerce residents into moving, but there is no proof of these allegations.

The UAN is one of the largest and most prosperous nations on Earth, and along with China, it's one of the two major interplanetary, and more recently, interstellar powers. It is also one of the regions that has changed the most in the past century. A century ago, most residents of prosperous nations saw Africa as politically and economically unstable, and technologically backwards. Today, the residents of most less prosperous nations look upon the UAN with envy.

HISTORY

In the first decades of the 21st century, Africa was struggling to fully industrialize. Except in war torn regions, famines were a thing of the past, but both urban and rural poverty were widespread, and the infrastructure of most African nations was both old and inadequate. Although a few individual nations outside of Africa were far poorer, Africa was definitively the poorest continent on the planet. Two factors drastically changed this situation: In their search for inexpensive labor markets, China began investing heavily in several African nations in the early 21st century, and, because it was a symbol of global poverty, in the early days of the Nova Era a multitude of novas volunteered to help modernize the continent. Most worked for Project Utopia and other branches of the *Æon Society*, but many were independent, and their efforts — aided by Chinese investment — transformed the continent. Nova powers and heavily automated super-science assemblers allowed novas to construct entire cities and arcologies in a fraction of the time that conventional construction required. Small hyperfusion reactors provided clean and abundant power for these new settlements, as well as helping to improve conditions in existing cities and towns.

Novas also helped transform the land itself. Between 2025 and 2045, the Sahara Desert shrank to half its previous size. At the same time, the percentage of Africans living in poverty declined from almost half to slightly less than a fifth, while the percentage of Africans with college degrees more than tripled. With new infrastructure, and a relatively prosperous and well-educated population, the continent thrived. As the tensions leading up to the Aberrant War increased, most novas gradually left the newly formed UAN and returned to their home nations. Because so many African novas had left their homelands in the early years of the Nova Age, there were many fewer novas in Africa than in India, Western Europe, or the newly formed FSA. When the Aberrant War broke out, the UAN suffered somewhat less damage than most nations, and its prosperity and unified nature allowed the UAN to swiftly mobilize relief efforts to cities that suffered nova-related violence.

After the Aberrant War ended, the UAN was relatively untouched and possessed some of the newest and most advanced infrastructure on the planet. These advantages allowed the UAN to rapidly rebuild and to swiftly become an economically dominant power. Its previous close alliance with China also provided the UAN with a valuable international ally that helped it to move from being a local, then global, and eventually interstellar power. Today, the UAN does not need to rely on any other nations for help, but its ties with China remain quite solid.

SURVEILLANCE AND PRIVACY IN THE UAN

Like most other prosperous nations, the UAN is heavily surveilled, with a modest number of sensors of all types in all but the most remote wilderness areas. The UAN places most of its sensors in cities and its many large wildlife sanctuaries and nature reserves. However, unlike China, the FSA, and other more autocratic nations, the UAN places strict limits on how and when local officials can use this surveillance. The heart of these limitations are the SIs that control and review the surveillance data in real-time.

Except when the local or UAN government declares a state of emergency, these SIs can only look and listen for emergencies likes fires or explosions, evidence of weapon use, screams and cries for help, and identifying features of known or suspected criminals or victims of kidnapping. While the UAN keeps recordings of public surveillance for one year, law enforcement officials can only access it for emergencies or to investigate known crimes. Government officials from China regularly complain that UAN privacy regulations handcuff law enforcement, but the overall rate of violent crimes and serious non-violent crimes, like large scale thefts, is no higher in the UAN than in China, and most citizens of the UAN strongly oppose loosening restrictions on surveillance.

One feature that is ubiquitous in the UAN, but rarer elsewhere, are violence warnings. If the surveillance SIs notice someone who appears that they may soon become a victim of either a random accident or

deliberate violence, it sends a brief message to the individual's display gear or minicomp. These warnings are often only useful if someone has wearable or implanted display gear and can instantly receive this message, but in these cases most people are able to avoid harm. In addition, these same SIs send a message to anyone who seems to be about to commit a crime, warning them that they are under observation and that the SIs have noticed their potential activities.

By UAN law, unless the potential attacker was using restricted weapons or otherwise already committing a crime, the SIs report nothing beyond the fact that they warned someone because a specific individual may have been threatening them. UAN law only permits law enforcement officials to detain someone if they are a potential attacker who has almost attacked three or more people in a year. At this point, law enforcement officials talk to the person, and may mandate counseling, a restraining order, or other remedies.

SAFE ZONES

The UAN also has an unusual method of dealing with issues of privacy, surveillance, and crime prevention — the creations of specialized *Eneo Salama* (Safe Zones). A specialized set of rules apply to these carefully marked regions. While many are single neighborhoods, some towns and small arcologies are Safe Zones. In Safe Zones, all forms of potentially dangerous violence are not merely illegal, as is true all across the UAN, but effectively impossible. There is more surveillance in Safe Zones and this surveillance includes limited access to the display gear of anyone who lives in a Safe Zone. If the advanced SIs that administer the Safe Zone notice anyone about to perform significant violence on another person or otherwise endanger someone, they send an exceedingly loud message to the perpetrator's display gear. As is true elsewhere in the UAN, they also warn the potential victim. If the perpetrator does not instantly cease their potentially threatening actions, one of many small, low power sonic or taser pistols built into all surveillance devices in Safe Zones fires at the perpetrator, briefly stunning them. The SIs abstain if doing so would endanger either individual, but in most cases attempting to punch someone in a Safe Zone results in the attacker stumbling and walking away with a headache. The only exceptions

to these sanctions are on-duty law enforcement officials who are attempting to prevent a crime.

If the perpetrator continues attempting to commit violence, the SIs fire full power sonic or taser attacks at them, rendering the attacker unconscious. Also, in any case where the SI fires at someone, it also immediately notifies local law enforcement, and the individual receives punishments like a stern lecture (for first offenses, especially for juvenile offenders), mandatory classes in managing aggression, being banned from all Safe Zones and going on a law enforcement watch list, or receiving a wearable or implanted device that instantly but briefly paralyses the wearer whenever they attempt to commit violence against another person. However, if the SI's warning causes the individual to immediately cease being a threat, then the SIs deal with this warning in the same manner as surveillance SIs elsewhere in the UAN.

By UAN law, no one can be required to live or work in a Safe Zone. As a result, Safe Zones are most common in recently constructed or rebuilt neighborhoods or arcologies, where the first residents declare it to be a Safe Zone and invite others who wish to life and work in one to move there. UAN law endeavors to make certain that no adult must live or work in a Safe Zone, but this system is not perfect, since some businesses make certain to place their headquarters and other important offices in Safe Zones. Since officials first introduced them in 2090, Safe Zones in the UAN have continued to grow in both size and number. Today almost 10% of UAN residents now live in Safe Zones. Experts predict that this percentage will continue to increase.

INEQUALITY

Government and society in the UAN continue to engage in a struggle between two competing ideals that the residents struggle to reconcile. A concern for the welfare of all Africans is one of the cornerstones of the UAN constitution and UAN society. However, because of Africa's history of colonialism and exploitation, one of the dominant ideologies throughout the UAN is a conviction that everyone should strive for excellence. The result of this tension is that basic income and similar services for the poor are among the best on the planet. There is also strong social pressure not to rely on these services without an excellent reason. These services are acceptable for children, the disabled, and the elderly, but many Africans consider anyone who falls outside of these categories, and who have no other means of support, to be weak and insufficiently motivated.

These feelings are most common among older residents of the UAN. To the dismay of their elders, a growing number of young people consider anyone who has an intense and consuming hobby that they strive to excel at to be fully living up to their potential, even if this hobby lacks any means of earning the person money. This tension between younger and older residents is partly due to the fact that there is absolutely no need for many UAN residents to even work part time, and there are insufficient jobs for all. This surplus of workers looks unlikely to end anytime soon. However, attitudes have yet to fully catch up to this new reality.

JOMO KENYATA SPACEPORT

Built around the Mount Kenya space elevator, Jomo Kenyata Spaceport is the largest and busiest spaceport on Earth, and one of the four largest cities or arcologies in the UAN. In the last decade of the 21st century, it was the launching point for two Mars colonies and half the missions that built the asteroid belt's basic infrastructure. Today, it remains on the cutting edge of space travel. Next to the space elevator's vast base are the jump rings to Olympus on Luna, as well as others to Shanghai and Brasilia. In addition, engineers recently equipped the Abuhisi space station, at the other end of the Mount Kenya space elevator, with docking tubes specially designed to work with Leviathan jump ships. Abuhisi also possesses custom-built facilities for performing repairs and maintenance on the biotech spacecraft that Upeo teleporters use for their large interstellar expeditions. Today, most Upeo starships that teleport to or from the solar system do so either from Jomo Kenyata or Abuhisi.

Jomo Kenyata is also home to Nkumbe Industries, which constructs most of the spacecraft used by the UAN, as well as a growing number of products designed to aid extrasolar exploration and settlement. Nkumbe Industries has divided its shipyards between Jomo Kenyata and Abuhisi. They construct spacecraft systems and hybrid craft in Jomo Kenyata and build large spacecraft that cannot land on Abuhisi. To speed production and lower costs, Nkumbe Industries recently installed a pair of jump rings that connect their facilities in Jomo Kenyata with those in Abuhisi. Now, dozens of workers regularly use jump rings to travel to Abuhisi, Olympus, and to nations across the globe. In addition, companies like Nkumbe send hundreds of delicate parts to

distant destinations via jump ring, allowing them to eliminate shipping delays and better unify their divisions in Jomo Kenyatta, Abuhisi, and Olympus into a single closely connected whole.

THE CRIMINAL UNDERWORLD

Jomo Kenyata is a remarkably safe city, and despite significant privacy restrictions on the use of electronic surveillance, violent crime is remarkably low and most property crime is similarly rare. However, as is the case in all Earth's cities, large criminal gangs have found ways to thrive amidst the city's peaceful order. As befits a city so heavily focused on transport, the most profitable activity these gangs engage in are cargo theft and smuggling. Despite the elaborate capers popular in holovid crime dramas, most cargo theft and smuggling are remarkably mundane and relatively low tech. Barely concealed compartments on spacecraft, combined with paying a few hundred yuan to customs and security personnel remains a tried and true method for successful smuggling. Bribes alone are often sufficient to allow someone to walk off with a few easily portable but moderately valuable and resalable items. As always, humans are usually the weakest link in any form of security.

Other, far more elaborate options also exist. Illegal, or repurposed legal bioapps, world-class hackers, and the occasional rogue psion are all options that Jomo Kenyata's two largest criminal syndicates occasionally use. The flashiest and most effective form of smuggling involves teleportation. However, rogue jumpers teleporting in and carrying away large amounts of stolen or smuggled goods or simply teleporting the goods themselves is exceedingly rare, since teleporters are rare, and the number of teleporters who work as freelance criminals is exceptionally small. Currently, officials believe that no more than two such criminals are operating in the UAN. Also, until six months ago, there were almost no teleporters on Earth, and none of the handful who had gone to ground were willing to risk discovery by becoming high profile criminals.

However, that's not to say that teleportation has no place in smuggling or theft. Any psion with an Auxiliary mode in Transmission or Portals can teleport relatively small objects and can do so with a range of several kilometers. Physically stealing or simply teleporting a valuable item to their possession and then teleporting it to a pre-arranged location outside of the customs perimeter is a tactic that security personnel who work on and around the space elevator are familiar with. Without the services of a clear or a cooperating witness, these types of theft or smuggling are typically impossible to prove, much less successfully prosecute.

In addition, three months ago, criminals stole a pair of jump rings from a biotech factory in Lagos, and various UAN law enforcement agencies are investigating rumors that one of these jump rings is now in Jomo Kenyata, while the other is off Earth, with different stories putting it on Abuhisi, Olympus, or perhaps on a small private spacecraft. Regardless of the actual location of the second jump ring, smugglers and thieves who possess it could easily move goods on or off Earth in ways that would be impossible for anyone but a powerful clairsentient to track or even notice.

One advantage local law enforcement does possess is that two criminal syndicates who are bitter rivals compete to control the organized theft and smuggling in the Jomo Kenyata Spaceport. Between them, these two syndicates control the vast majority of smuggling and cargo theft associated with both Jomo Kenyata and Abuhisi, but each group would love to push the other out and claim that organization's share for their own. As a result, there is periodic conflict between them, and these conflicts often permit local law enforcement to arrest low- and mid-level members of each organization.

The more prosperous of the two, known as *Blade Ya Dhahabu* (Golden Blade), are wealthier and better equipped due to the fact that they are an illegal and carefully concealed subsidiary of the Hassani-Simba Trading Company. As a result, they regularly use both spacecraft they own, and spacecraft which carry goods belonging to Hassani-Simba to smuggle other unlisted items, and also to steal goods from competitors to sell on the black market. Of course, Golden Blade also "steals" at least some goods from Hassani-Simba, to prevent law enforcement officials from making a clear connection between the two organizations.

Golden Blade is relatively non-violent, but only in the sense that violence is rarely their first option. However, it is their preferred second choice, at least when dealing with members of other criminal gangs or with corrupt officials. If bribes, blackmail, misdirection, or threats fail, then Golden Blade enforcers take care of any problematic individuals swiftly and mercilessly. They also pride themselves on avoiding any civilian casualties and do their best to avoid random property damage.

Much of Golden Blade's theft and smuggling efforts focus on either evading taxes, tariffs, and other restrictions or stealing valuable but relatively anonymous goods that Hassani-Simba can easily add to their own stocks of similar goods. As a result, much of their efforts focus on rare metals and minerals coming from the asteroid belt, and biologicals and other valuable materials from extrasolar colonies, as well as smuggling restricted weapons, bioapps, and similar commercially produced items off Earth. Golden Blade almost never takes contracts from outsiders to steal or smuggle specific items, and rarely handles unique items like stolen alien artifacts.

The other major criminal syndicate in this city is the local division of a larger criminal organization with branches all across the UAN, *Nguvu za Njaa* (the Power of Hunger). The Power of Hunger engages in all forms of crime, including theft, smuggling, murder for hire, illegal gambling and drugs, extortion, blackmail, and occasionally kidnapping. The Power of Hunger is notably more violent than Golden Blade, although to survive, it also does its best to avoid harming civilians. Law enforcement officials believe that the Power of Hunger has several rogue psions working for it, including at least one electrokinetic who specializes in controlling electronics, like alarm and surveillance systems. Also, officials suspect that the Power of Hunger is the group most likely to have acquired the stolen jump rings.

Much of the Power of Hunger's business is identical to Golden Blade's, smuggling or stealing valuable raw materials coming to Earth, and smuggling restricted weapons, bioapps, drugs, and other technologies off Earth. They are rumored to possess close ties with the Leopards, the criminal gang on Karroo mining station, and officials suspect they are also helping to smuggle weapons to rebels on both Mars and Averiguas. In addition, the Power of Hunger regularly takes contracts to steal specific items for wealthy customers. Recent examples include stealing a handful of hexer artifacts from Ivdel and smuggling artifacts stolen from the excavations on Bullseye.

Law enforcement officials also believe the Power of Hunger recently acquired a contract to steal valuable technologies from Qinshui. UAN law enforcement is currently seeking to learn whether the Power of Hunger is working with Qin criminals or is simply planning to steal from the Qin. Because of the potential for either of these activities to cause a major diplomatic incident, UAN law enforcement is working closely with the Æon Trinity and the Ministry to attempt to prevent any such crimes from occurring.

CHAPTER TWO

THREATS AND DANGERS

"The dangerous thing about truth is the way it changes depending on how you're looking at it. One man's gospel truth is another man's blasphemous lie. The dangerous thing about people is the way we'll try to kill anyone whose truth doesn't agree with ours."
— Mira Grant

While monstrous Aberrants, and the hostile forces of the Coalition and the Chromatics wait in the depths of interstellar space, Earth is far from safe. The following are some of the organizations that threaten the safety, or at minimum, the stability of the planet. Some of these organizations, like space pirates or the White Mirror Society, are inherently dangerous and destructive. Others, like the Ghosts of Cincinnatus or Psi Nippon work toward goals that many people support and agree with but have the potential achieve in dangerous ways. As a result, members of the Æon Trinity or one of the psi orders working on Earth or Luna could easily face problems caused by one or more of these groups.

THE CHURCH OF THE SHINING MIND

The psi orders are familiar with controversy and criticism. Despite a carefully curated introduction as saviors from Aberrant savagery, psions find no shortage of conspiracy theorists, faiths, and even governments spouting concerns about the use and potential abuse of psi powers, and the possible consequences of tampering with humanity's "natural" state. The unconditional adulation of the Church of the Shining Mind might seem like a pleasant contrast at first, but this modern cult's worship of psions reaches its own twisted extremes.

To the Church of the Shining Mind, psi powers are not just science but sacred; psions themselves are more than heroes, they're holy. Shining Mind doctrine holds that psions are the next step in humanity's evolution, a blessing upon the whole species. They don't believe that baseline humans are defunct, but rather that it is their place to serve, and the place of psions to lead and rule. As yet, psions may not realize or understand their destiny to become kings and queens over Earth, so it falls to these humble but enlightened followers to offer guidance and prepare the way for a utopian future.

Of course, where there are angels, so there are devils too. They believe psions who reject their destiny are misguided or ignorant, but psions who try to prevent others from following the righteous path are corrosive to humanity's transcendent future. The day that the psi orders turned inwards and purged the Chitra Bhanu remains the bleakest moment in modern history, as far as the Shining Mind is concerned, and it espouses a vigorous and angry creed of retribution upon those responsible. Believers must pluck the poisonous apples out of the holy harvest. Several of the Proxies who refuse to lead the psi orders to glorious rule are the Satan of this Church's faith, the Ahriman opposing the holy possibilities of unfettered psionic potential — particularly General Larssen.

HERO WORSHIPERS

The Nova Age saw a brief apogee of fans venerating people with powers — in that case, the Aberrants. Given how *that* turned out, it's not surprising that many cultures around the world held on to a certain cynicism in the face of the psi orders' emergence. The trauma of the Aberrant War lingers, even 60 years later, and few are in a rush to repeat the same mistakes. Psion heroism over the past 15 years had to balance against the common citizen's worries of psi order overreach, the authoritarian approaches taken by certain psi orders in particular nations, and the gnawing existential angst of the baseline human confronted by someone with supernatural capabilities.

Still, the psi orders *are* awfully heroic, with both well-managed public relations and genuinely self-sacrificing, inspiring actions to protect humanity. Psi orders have helped push the cutting edge of technological progress and opened up paths to the stars. Especially among younger generations, they have their fans and even entire psi-spotter OpNet communities. Novelists and media companies

produce wildly popular stories featuring noble psions on amazing adventures.

Taking that leap from admiration to adoration is a smaller step than most might think — after all, they're not called fanatics for nothing. The Church of the Shining Mind draws in impressionable youths from fan communities, particularly those who desperately hoped to express psionic latency but never did. Plenty in the fandoms see the Shining Mind as extremists or delusional, and refer to them mockingly as "psi-toadies" or "toads," but the cult's heady mix of pseudoscience with an ambitious vision that the "unenlightened" just don't get has a strong appeal for youths looking for rebellion or a sense of superiority over their fellows.

More than just fans fill out the cult's ranks. The Church is genuine in its religious beliefs, and warmly embraces victims of Aberrant attacks, governmental oppression, and natural disasters who psion intervention saved from harm — or who believe psions *could* have saved them, if the psi orders had only stepped in. Transhumanists and overreaching academics espouse theories of expanding psionic potential in the species' genetics, pointing to the next stage of evolution. Splinter groups from major faiths with concepts of reincarnation or salvation claim that Aberrants are humanity's vice made manifest, and psions are particularly virtuous souls.

The Church also draws in those who desire or covet psionic status. Recruits come in through classes to cultivate "harmonious psychic resonance," spiritual courses that the Shining Mind claims improve the general psychic health of the human race and increase the likelihood that a participant's children will be born with latent psionic potential. Premium-priced health and meditation regimens promise the development of latency where none exists, so that when the Church's utopian future opens up Prometheus Chamber access to all, the resentful and hopeful will have that chance at becoming psions that the psi orders or some genetic accident so cruelly denied them. The Church has absolutely no proof of nor ability to deliver on these supposed routes to psionic power, but the dream exerts a potent pull, nonetheless.

Against expectations, the Church of the Shining Mind is neither the creation of psions nor run by them. The cult is the brainchild of Spiritual Leader Jawed Panahi, a man with absolutely no psionic potential whatsoever but who ardently believes that Proxy Bhurano intended to make him a quantakinetic before the other orders destroyed the Chitra Bhanu and his chance at enlightenment. The cult fetes its few psion members as holy gurus, lavishes them with gifts, and has lower-ranking members serve their every whim. It does not, however, offer them much actual power over the Shining Mind's wider movement. It tells psions that they are too important for that; sit in your holy shrine, demonstrate your wisdom to the congregation, and use your majestic powers to help us when we call — but leave the duty of spreading your word to us. The time for psionic rule will come soon. *Soon*.

SHINING THE LIGHT

The Church of the Shining Mind wants to bring more psions into its organization, to spread its word to the masses, and to visit retribution on psions who oppose its agenda or who try to restrain the potential of others of their kind.

For most psions, the Church seems like a minor pest; for a few, they're a menace of stalking and harassment. Over-eager missionaries petition any psion who gets their attention for being particularly impressive or awe-inspiring, seeking audience with the "chosen one" and trying to sway them to join the cult. Of course, most psions with significant public presences are important figures that Shining Mind members can't get anywhere near, so it's the rank-and-file psi order members on Earth just trying to live their lives who get most of the unwanted attention. In a few cases, cultists have broken into psions' homes to look for "relics" to carry away and worship or sought blackmail material on relatives and lovers to conscript them as cohorts in a recruitment effort. Church seniors like to send attractive young cultists out on petitioning efforts, leaning hard on impressionable members to make themselves intimately available to a psion and literally seduce a target into the Shining Mind. Obsessed cultists can make a low-ranking psion's life miserable.

Church-sponsored attacks are a bigger problem for the psi orders as a whole. The threat is relative, of course. A band of cultists angrily vandalizing the home of a psi order member responsible for bringing down a rogue psion criminal is hardly as dangerous as a rampaging Aberrant. However, dedicated members of the Shining Mind have attacked psions known for involvement in the Chitra Bhanu purge with lethal force in the past, although it's rare for these attempts to result in actual murder.

Publicly, the Shining Mind calls for the UN, or perhaps even their church, to take the Prometheus Chambers from the psi orders' control and make them available for all. It considers the believed destruction of the Quantakinetic Chamber to be a horrific crime, absolutely unforgivable in denying humanity one of the eight sacred paths to enlightenment. Over-eager cultists have tried to break into known locations of Chambers before in hopes of carrying them off, usually with little understanding of the actual physical logistics of achieving such a task, but these raids are not the official policy of Jawed or the remainder of the cult leadership. The Shining Mind *does* want to seize a Chamber but knows it'll require a great deal of planning and preparation to pull off. Its first target is the Vitakinetic Chamber, which it believes to be in the Æsculapian Order's headquarters in Switzerland.

Few of the Church's psions are order members. Rogue and freelance psions are much more vulnerable to its predations, lacking the support network that order psions possess. If there's no one to tell you what a bad idea it is, the perfumed shrines and lithe young worshipers the Church offers can be awfully tempting. The sheen of such decadence can fade, and psions can ask difficult questions about why they're not running the show, so a recent initiative is the Church's formation of Freedom Bands.

Each Band is a group of Church psions brought together to train along the old ideals of superhero teams, and the Church actively markets them in that manner among the psion fan communities of the OpNet. Freedom Bands travel the same circuits as faith healers and religious grifters, sharing the Church's message with receptive congregations across the FSA, Europe, and UAN, raking in donations for the cult. More than that, though, they serve as elite paramilitary squads deployed on missions to protect freelance or rogue psions from those who mean them harm — an effective recruitment tool painting the Church as a benefactor among the unaligned psion community. The Spiritual Leader keeps several lawyers on payroll purely for handling the court cases that result from Freedom Band deployments.

CHANGING DOCTRINE

Most outsiders assume that the Church of the Shining Mind is the puppet of a psion with delusions of grandeur. Some joke that it's a Ministry project, others whisper that it's the new front of surviving Chitra Bhanu members who want vengeance for the destruction of their Order. The fact that a psion

doesn't run the Church is, however, increasingly a problem for it.

The Church elders want to have their cake and eat it; they believe in the sanctity of the psionic state, but they've grown accustomed to the power and influence of being at the top of a moderately successful faith movement that attracts particularly devoted and impressionable followers. Now that they're actually having some results in drawing psions to the cult, church officials must face the dichotomy that their faith says the psions should rule — but surrendering rule to the psions means losing their own significance.

They're also mostly cowards. The cult leaders let low-ranking followers do the deniable, dirty work of seducing psions, spraying graffiti, vandalizing property, and outright murder attempts. They're often cautious on their overall efforts, unwilling to risk too much of what they've built. They've become afraid of what embracing the psions as rulers really means, because they know the temperament of the would-be godlings who joined them. People enticed on the promise of majesty and power are, unsurprisingly, keen on *using* that power.

The foremost troublemaker among the Church psions is a psychokinetic, Cormorant Ellis, a woman from the FSA and former freelancer. Cormorant doesn't just chafe at her growing realization of the leaders' hypocrisy in how they treat their '"holy heroes"; she has big plans of her own, and she spreads the dissent to the rest of her Freedom Band. If China seemingly allows the Ministry to effectively run a country, as she sees it, why shouldn't she and other psions do the same? Yet every time she comes to the Spiritual Leader with her plans to forge a suitable new homeland that the Church can openly control, he cautions restraint, and suggests other tasks that need her attention, and says *the time is not yet right*.

Cormorant understands now that the time will *never* be right, so she'll have to shift the clock forward directly. Rebellion brews within the Shining Mind, and unless the cult silences its own internal critics by moving up its plan to seize a Prometheus Chamber, the rogue psions will soon truly run it. When they do, the Church is likely to throw aside all restraint in its bid for influence and power.

THE GHOSTS OF CINCINNATUS

Where do patriots go when their nation dies?

Some die with it. Some evolve to meet the new reality. Some refuse to adapt and sink into embittered nostalgia.

But a few, trained and equipped to be that nation's guardians in extremis, might go undercover. In the cold, as the espionage parlance goes. In the wind. Their insider access would enable them to erase all traces of their existence. Black budgets would furnish all the necessary tools of unknown provenance. Their employers' successor agencies would never consider them threats because no one would know to look for them.

If such a thing were to happen, the story might go something like this:

MISSION

In the dying days of the old United States of America, as the elected government crumbled and martial law became the only law, a few mid-level leaders in various security agencies saw the writing on the wall. They were experts in policy analysis; the difficulty in recognizing the indicators of other failed states was an emotional one, not an intellectual one. Even among the bitterest of interagency rivalries, backchannels exist, so they talked to one another. They cross-checked their analyses. The answer was consistent: Absent an out-of-context solution, the American federal government was irrecoverable.

In the short term, military governance looked like a necessary evil to ensure any vestige of national survival. A counter-coup to restore civilian authority over the military would have disrupted too many essential relief functions. Regardless of who was in charge when the dust settled, there wouldn't be a winner.

The information exchange became a conspiracy. The conspiracy became a movement. The movement began recruiting like-minded personnel (trivial when the recruiters were also the security screeners) and siphoning off resources (equally trivial when the thieves were also the auditors). Amidst the Aberrant War's last bloody spasms, an unknown number of American intelligence officers, government agents, and bureaucrats, along with their families, quietly ceased to officially exist. To the rest of the world, they were just part of the statistics now

occupying mass graves. The newly formed FSA had better things to do than go digging in the hopes of matching DNA or dental records, and it had no reason to do so anyway.

The movement had two simple but ironclad ideals. First: absolute dedication to the eventual restoration of government and law under the United States Constitution. Second: utter secrecy in the name of both self-preservation and strategic surprise.

In pursuit of the latter point, the movement's leaders tried hard to avoid giving a name to their organization. A name is power; it's an identity, a thread that an enemy can follow. They hid their work behind innocuous random designations that blended into the national security apparatus: Operation Thrush, Bayou Druid, Project 419, the Government Logistics Quality Assurance Office. But identity is also a unifying symbol. Despite efforts to the contrary, the Ghosts of Cincinnatus were born, invoking both the legacy of the Roman icon of civic virtue and the eponymous society of Continental Army veterans.

STRUCTURE

The founding Ghosts appropriated resources from the U.S. Marshals Service's Witness Security Program and other sources to establish new identities for their members. Cells composed of multiple family groups, selected for complementary skill sets, settled across North America in out-of-the-way places where the Aberrant War wouldn't attract the military government's attention. Among the mass movements of displaced urban populations, a few more families here and there went unremarked.

Today, these cells appear similar to any other rural American clan descended from the flotsam of the Aberrant War diaspora. A typical Ghost clan consists of 50 to 100 members across multiple generations, living on a large communal homestead on the outskirts of a farming community or a salvage and reconstruction hub. They're polite, inoffensive, quiet... good neighbors. All hold first-class citizenship, either directly or through incorporation of their homesteads. They take pains to avoid attracting official attention — or, for that matter, *any* sort of attention. Outsiders who inquire into a clan's business have their questions deflected so adroitly that they rarely realize what happened until well after the fact.

The Ghosts carefully designed their "grey man" facade to shield their core intelligence and counter-intelligence functions from detection. Only a few members of each clan are Active (i.e., pursuing the movement's agenda directly) at any time. The rest are exactly what they appear to be — farmers, tradespeople, professionals in essential but boring fields, even minor FSA bureaucrats — who just happen to spend their evenings and weekends supporting their Active brethren.

A few Ghost clans still harbor elderly founding members, but most are on second- or third-generation leadership, raised and trained to the role. A clan runs as a benevolent autocracy in which its "elder" (not necessarily the oldest member) takes counsel from experts but ultimately owns all the important decisions. Predesignated lines of succession ensure smooth transitions.

Every clan has a reason for its members to travel. That may be business interests, hobbies, a tradition of pilgrimages or "family reunions," or anything else that shows the CSA's suspicious eye what it expects to see. The important part is regular physical movement to a part of the country at a time that just happens to coincide with the travel schedule of one or more other clans. This is how the clans coordinate plans, share intelligence, and introduce their offspring to one another. Outside marriage is a security risk, so young Ghosts often find themselves maneuvered into arranged marriages if they can't (or don't want to) find a partner who can pass their elders' screening.

The movement has principles, not overall leadership. Each clan pursues these principles according to its Active members' inclination and capabilities. Infrequent major operations occur only when geographically proximate clans' elders can negotiate for one another's assistance. There's a general agreement that the movement lacks effectiveness because of this decentralization, but there isn't consensus on how to fix it or who should be responsible for the effort.

ASSETS

Ghost clan culture is Ghost clan tradecraft, and it's a brand of tradecraft that would be familiar to any spy from two centuries ago. In truth, the Ghosts of Cincinnatus straddle the line between conspiracy and cult. Every native member grows up immersed in pre-2070s American history. Despite the founders' best efforts, younger members increasingly idealize US history as oral tradition and ancient hardcopy textbooks replace living memory. It's a very rare Ghost who doesn't believe wholeheartedly in the mission of incrementally gathering

intelligence, which will eventually enable the engineered collapse of the FSA and the return of American democracy. It's just that the clans' idea of American democracy bears more resemblance to a mid-20th-century middle-class suburban fantasy than any practical reality. Even the few carefully vetted outsiders who do marry into the clans, and the orphans who the clans adopt to further diversify the gene pools, receive intensive indoctrination bordering on outright brainwashing.

This combination of historical awareness (imperfect though it is), loyalty, and deception as natural as breathing is the Ghosts' greatest advantage. Equally important is the movement's tradecraft, which is simple and archaic, relying on analog methods and technology whenever possible. This began as a way to avoid the digital sphere in which both Aberrants and the military government had superior capabilities, but it's turned out to be equally advantageous in flying beneath Orgotek's proverbial radar. Deaddrops, book ciphers, one-time pads, counter-surveillance, agent handling via MICE-RC (money, ideology, conscience, ego, revenge, coercion) motivations, even microdot steganography... the classics never went out of style for the Ghosts. In a world of ubiquitous connectivity, a conspiracy that keeps literally all its records in hardcopy or trained human memory is effectively invisible in the FSA's eyes.

This isn't to say the movement is one of Luddites. In their public lives, clan members are as technologically adept as any other first-class citizens. Moreover, when the situation calls for it, most clans retain extensive collections of antique off-the-books tech for surveillance, covert entry, or even the vanishingly rare direct action. They only cache more recent equipment after tearing it down its bare bones and source code to ensure no hidden features are going to betray them.

The Ghosts' final resource is a rumor — even within the movement. The founders allegedly included a handful of low-powered novas (clan history is clear on the distinction between novas and Aberrants) who'd maintained their sanity through insane loyalty that aligned with the movement's precepts. No one actually knows which clans these novas joined, or if they wandered off on their own, or if they're still alive... the third- and fourth-generation children whisper that the elders have one hell of an ace card.

There are no Ghost psions. The elders see the psi orders' control of the Prometheus Chamber process as an unacceptable security risk. The meme of psi as new, unpredictable, and dangerous is strong in the clans. There may or may not be Talents hidden among the clans, their true nature unknown even to themselves.

OPERATIONS

For most of their existence, the Ghosts watched everything and did nothing. The movement has voluminous files on FSA security, military force dispositions, leaders, covert operations, economic cornerstones... if there's a fact that might help someone hurt the FSA, a clan probably has it written down somewhere. In the hands of the UN or the international media, the sheer weight of blackmail material alone could topple the current government.

That's not what the Ghosts want, though — or rather, it's not *all* they want. The movement exists to restore the old Constitution (and, as a side effect, return American borders to their pre-Aberrant War status, which strongly implies restoring Canadian and Mexican independence, too). What's been lacking until the last decade is strong movement toward *that* goal.

With third- and fourth-generation Ghosts now Active, a sense of urgency permeates the movement. Emerging leaders saw their parents dedicate their lives to an unrealized ideal and they want to see the vision through in their own lifetimes. There are arguments on implementation, and a few elders are holding out, but most Ghost clans are now laying the groundwork for what they hope will be a ready-made successor to the FSA government.

First, asset recruitment is now a growth industry. Every cell is cultivating leaders in its host community who will be capable of raising grassroots support for democracy. A select few of these are also receiving tutelage from history and civics textbooks that the FSA would like to see incinerated.

Second, the clans are reaching out to the various resistance groups — Trumerican, Canadian, and Mexican alike — who they previously deemed too dangerous to approach. Some are moving cautiously but others have gone so far as to use resistance organizations as cutouts for direct action against particularly odious public figures. While the Ghosts are well aware that violent revolution is unsustainable, their intent is to cultivate leaders in *these* groups who can fill the power vacuum and temporarily secure order in the period between the collapse of the FSA's security apparatus and the re-establishment of Constitutional governance and law enforcement.

Third, a massive memetic campaign is in the works. Designed to pave the way for the eventual release of the aforementioned dirty laundry, this will make the FSA citizen on the street more receptive to their government's illegitimacy in the eyes of the people. The clans' social isolation works against them here and those leading this project want to seek outside help.

Finally, Active members are preparing their families for direct action. Training in sabotage, marksmanship, escape and evasion, and other arts is ramping up. The hope is that the Ghost clans will soon be able to take the field directly, leading a popular uprising through surgical strikes and guerrilla education. The fear is that if the movement stumbles, these skills will be essential to surviving the inevitable reprisals.

LEAKS

It's a testament to the effectiveness of the Ghosts' tradecraft that after 70 years and multiple generations, only three outside groups suspect their existence.

Ironically, the clans' lack of central direction has led to parallel evolution. Multiple clans have channeled intelligence to Mexican and Canadian resistance cells, as well as to Trumerican organizations in the Great Lakes and Southwest Districts. The similarities between the resistance groups' target selection, as well as their uncharacteristically sophisticated tactics in assassinating particularly abusive or corrupt officials, have the CSA looking for a coordinated foreign intelligence operation. The closest they've come so far is a suspicion that the Minneapolis-based Cantrell clan might be Trumerican sympathizers.

The Æon Trinity is closer to the truth from a completely different angle. Last year, a joint Nereus-Argus research project to examine genealogical factors in Blight Aberrant eruptions recently uncovered a network of genetic isolate communities across the continent. Initial concerns that this might be an Aberrant cult or breeding program led to Juno surveillance. In turn, this crossed paths with a Medea Initiative attempt to trace the source of recently reproduced pre-FSA history texts. The involved Æon divisions are still trying to figure out just what they've stumbled into.

The last party who's aware of the Ghosts, and the one with the best view, is Giuseppe del Fuego. *Nossa Força Verde* action in Central America during the 2090s brought the future biokinetic proxy into contact with another group that was gathering intelligence on his own FSA corporate targets. Sensing a potential ally, del Fuego approached these operatives, whose masterful evasion left a lasting

impression. Subsequent investigation both before and after his noetic transformation led him to identify several of the Mexico-based clans. Professional courtesy keeps him from approaching them, and he doesn't know the full extent of the Ghosts' network, but he's keeping tabs on them as a possible cutout for deniable work in the north.

The Ghosts of Cincinnatus Path (Origin)

If the Ghosts of Cincinnatus exist in a particular chronicle, a neutral (or Talent, or possibly even nova) clan member might be a viable concept. Such an individual would integrate well with many groups, having trained from birth to move unnoticed through modern society and possessing the skills necessary to do the sort of things most player character teams do. Due to the Ghosts' agenda of overthrowing a superpower's government, though, the potential for conflicting interests is something the Storyguide and players should consider carefully. Of course, an entire Ghost-focused campaign is feasible, too.

Example Connections: Anti-FSA Rebel Cell, Community Leader, Government Functionary Nebbish, Influential Joe Hologram

Skills: Humanities, Integrity, Larceny, Persuasion

Edges: Alternate Identity, Covert (almost a requirement for Ghosts), Iron Will, Library, Photographic Memory, Safe House (as per the Norça Edge; Norça membership waived), Skilled Liar, Subtle Influence (as per the Ministry Edge; Ministry membership waived)

The Humanity Preservation Collective

This is an age of new frontiers, of marvels among the stars, yet some look to the cold void of space not with wonder or hope but with *terror*. The Humanity Preservation Collective is a radical organization pushing a species-isolationist agenda, preparing for the apocalypse they believe will descend upon humankind unless they take drastic steps. If they have their way, humanity will return to its cradle upon *terra firma* and shun the call of the endless skies.

The surface level of the Humanity Preservation Collective is a lobby group of philanthropists, survivalists, and special interests presenting an easy-to-digest argument well suited for public messaging. Look at what humanity's brief time in the stars has already revealed: Bullseye, a dead world slain from the skies, its teeming billions reduced to glassy smears. Ivdel, where autonomous killing machines trample over the corpses of a murdered alien species. The Chromatics, intent on butchering humankind. The hiding places of innumerable Aberrants, some of whom react to the expanding boundaries of humanity's reach by making war on their former kin once again.

Space, the HPC say, holds nothing but death for humankind.

The Humanity Preservation Collective believes in a Great Filter, a sword of Damocles hanging over intelligent life. Leave the safety of one's home world and all explorers find is a galaxy of corpse-civilizations, brutally expunged by their own convulsions or other more powerful, and as yet unknown, alien forces. If humanity is to survive, it must be quiet and hidden; it must reel in its adventurous tendencies, muffle its raucous hubbub of transmissions, and turn inward.

It may even be too late. The judgment of the cold void may already be poised to fall upon humanity. In that case, the HPC intends to be ready to weather that apocalypse. Above all other considerations, *humanity must survive*.

Preparation for the End

The general image of the Humanity Preservation Collective is as a vociferous but fringe group of doomsday preppers and xenophobes made respectable by the considerable wealth and societal status of certain key backers. The public-facing portion of the organization funds lobby groups, astronomical research institutes, and the high-profile Preservation Arcs — a series of mega-vaults under construction in mountain ranges in the FSA, central Europe, and UAN. The Preservation Arcs vary in official purpose. They designed one to hold a massive seed bank and store genetic material on every known species on Earth. Another is touted as the ultimate survival bunker that could hold an entire

community if doomsday comes, and yet another rents out space within for private interests to store priceless cultural artifacts and artworks in the utmost security — and, if the end of the world *does* happen, ensuring that they will be preserved for future surviving generations.

Dues-paying members of the HPC live all across the globe, with a community of philosophers, preppers, and idealists following regular newsletters about the Collective's progress in lobbying governments and constructing the Preservation Arcs. For most members, this is as far as it goes; they spout the Collective's propaganda and go on about their lives with a little of their existential angst assuaged, knowing they're part of an effort to *do something* about the terrible doom hanging over humanity's head. A panel of board members drawn from wealthy donors and valued experts oversees and guides the HPC, but the charismatic Philippa Charente serves as its figurehead, spokeswoman, and most vigorous activist of the Collective. A veteran ex-Legion psion, she sports terrible wounds from combat against the Chromatics over Karroo, and has extensive prosthetics replacing her lost arm and legs — a striking visual she exploits for full effect when railing at the disasters that humanity invites.

Some members come to the HPC via isolationist or inward-looking religions, former colonists from failed ventures that turned to disaster, military veterans horrified by the realities of war in space, and academics who genuinely believe activity among the stars exponentially increases the risk humanity will stumble on a threat it cannot deal with. From these more dedicated members, the Collective filters and selects prime candidates for employment in its internal projects. Hidden from the public eye, the HPC pursues far more drastic plans than simply building the megastructure equivalent of a bomb shelter, and it needs devoted believers ready to go to any lengths necessary to uphold the organization's maxim that humanity must survive above all else.

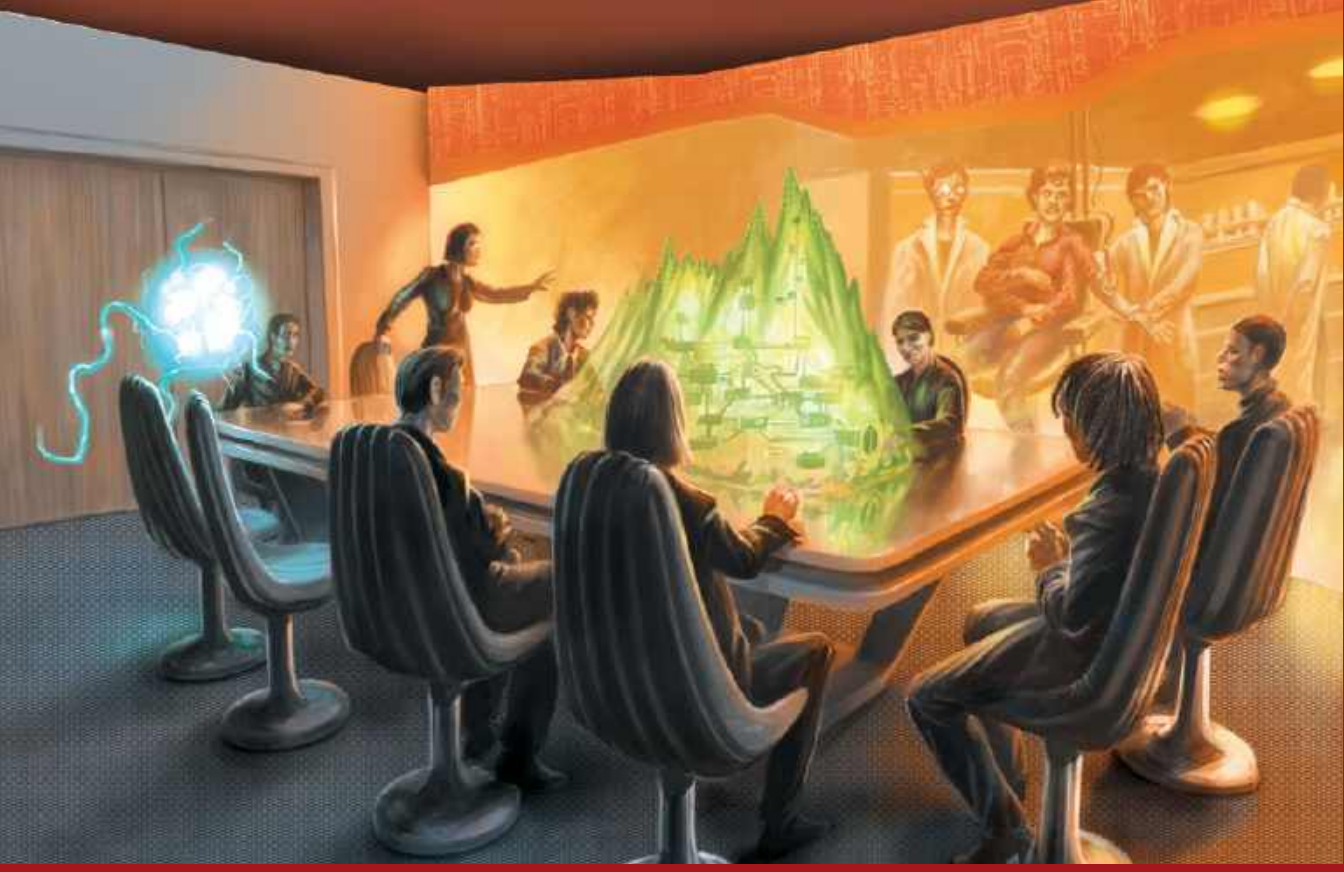
The HPC recently achieved a public relations coup. The early Collective decried the Upeo wa Macho as reckless and profligate in the way they explored space with little concern for the consequences upon the wider species, and initially leveraged the disappearance of the order as clear proof that the psions had run afoul of their hubris. The return of the Upeo wa Macho both soured and sharpened this argument, coming as it did alongside the appearance of the Chromatics over Earth. Membership shot up following that incident, and the most notable new recruits have been four of the teleporters themselves. Apparently shaken by their experiences in exile, the former Upeo wa Macho have renounced their order and aligned themselves with the goals of the HPC. This has seriously ruffled feathers within the order, but Proxy Atwan has instructed her psions to leave the apostates be for now.

One "member" of the HPC isn't human at all. Known only to the absolute inner circle of the Collective, a Doyen advises and influences Philippa Charente. The Doyen didn't create the Humanity Preservation Collective but appeared to the half-dozen rich patrons who did so soon after their efforts began to bear fruit in the public consciousness. It lends guidance and the occasional moment of direct psionic meddling to aid the HPC's efforts, presenting itself as the alien survivor of a civilization destroyed by the same threats that humankind now faces. This Doyen comes from the faction that wants to destroy or neutralize the threat of humankind. The alien favors the idea of getting humanity to put the genie of themselves back into their own bottle but believes the HPC has the potential to put a more destructive brake on human expansion if it appropriately incubates and supports this organization.

Ironically, the Doyen gives its advice as to how to safeguard humanity with genuine honesty. The Doyen, after all, are a fearful and paranoid people, focused on the survival of their own species above all else. The alien, therefore, finds an unexpected level of commonality with the humans it manipulates. Some of its kindred wonder if it isn't in the process of going native.

ACHIEVING SILENCE

Humanity must survive. To the HPC, everything else comes second to this overriding priority. As humankind reaches blindly into the stars, it invites disaster that could annihilate it in the blink of an eye. Instead of this gleeful fumbling for opportunities, the HPC proposes the consolidation of efforts entirely on Earth and humanity's immediate environs, the preparation of defenses and fallbacks against the worst that might come, and ceaseless vigilance against the terrors that wait in the darkness between the stars. They temper this grim, paranoid vision of the future by a somewhat utopian notion of humanity refocusing inward to develop intellectual, spiritual, and scientific pursuits, the reconfiguration of global culture to sustain a steady human population



that Earth's governments can be easily mask from the cosmos.

All that can come later, though. For now, it is the duty of the Collective to do whatever necessary to ward off the worst and ensure that, come what may, *something* of the species survives. The Preservation Arcs are a public success story, hitting the right notes with crucial segments of public opinion who find some admiration for clear efforts at ecological and cultural preservation in the face of disaster. They offer some small but genuine comfort to those who do sometimes lie awake and wonder what the empty ruins on far flung worlds might portend for humanity; the Arcs also attract more big-ticket investors from those rich and egotistical enough to believe the assurance of their own legacy to be a vital part of humanity's continuance.

The existing Arcs are just the start. The Collective plans further fortified complexes across the globe to protect a small but carefully chosen segment of the population in the event of extra-solar threats such as orbital bombardment or alien disease outbreaks. It doesn't just include its own membership on that exclusive list; plenty of high profile academics or scientists have received confidential invitations for a place in an Arc. The Collective's desire to pack Arcs with genetic material and artifacts is equally expansive and has little regard for legality. Collective agents steal items it deems critical to the cultural or artistic integrity of the species and squirrels them away into its most high-security vaults; it has the money to hire some of the best thieves in the business, including several Inspired, and is behind a number of unsolved heists in recent years. The HPC steals mass genetic survey data and the personal medical information of particularly interesting individuals for archiving, too, particularly of psions. It would dearly love to get its hands on whatever genetic information rumors say that the Nihonjin government obtained from widespread testing of their population.

Private laboratories explore more extreme solutions to the problem of assuring humanity's legacy. Several research teams investigate the possibility of mass nanite-based terraforming, pushing existing technological boundaries with little regard for ethical boundaries. If hostiles scour Earth from orbit, the survivors will emerge onto a world inhospitable to human existence; this project, then, is essentially a "grey goo" scenario intended as a new Garden of Eden, rebuilding and reseeding the surface with life from Preservation Arc archives.

Another laboratory uses human genetic data purchased or stolen by HPC agents for a more

preventative approach to the apocalypse. It's clear to the Collective that Aberrants remain a great threat to the species, given their ongoing emergences among the population. Driven by the whispers of the Doyen, the Collective leadership has concluded that the species' safety requires the scouring of Aberrant potential from the human genome itself. The Collective goes so far as to trace and abduct newly erupted Aberrants, whisking them away to be experimented upon and rendered down as part of this research. Aberrant-napping is a terribly dangerous proposition at the best of times, and the Collective had little success on this front until it encountered a self-loathing Aberrant called Clarice Saint-Nazaire. A French diasporan horrified by the *Esperanza* crash, Clarice shares the Collective's desire to scour Aberrant power from humanity — and possesses a death wish. In the meantime, she's physically powerful enough to beat down newly erupted Aberrants, although she's beginning to warp and mutate further.

If successful in identifying and eradicating Aberrant potential from the genome, the Collective plans to perform widespread involuntary eugenics via retrovirals released by tailored diseases. Some researchers are examining psionic potential for the same scrubbing treatment, and several freelance psions have vanished into Collective hands for rendering down. While the Collective's attitude towards psionic potential is less antagonistic, and it believes Clairsentience may even be vital to hide the species from hostile aliens, some members are concerned about the possibility of a "psionic signal" that entities among the stars might be able to detect. After all, Chromatics found humanity through the meddling of teleporters; what else might broadcasts of energy that can disrupt the very fabric of space and time draw to Earth?

THE NIGHTMARE CONTINGENCY

Most of what the Collective gathers they deem important due to its significance to humanity. The bowels of the Preservation Arcs include rooms filled with historical ceramics, instruments, furniture, and sculpture; one backer bought an entire surviving French chateau in the farthest south of the ruined country, and carefully packed its disassembled stones into a vault with instructions for rebuilding. Thrumming servers contain endless data of human history, culture, and genetic information, with choice pieces pried from behind government firewalls by elite hackers. Members believe that they should leave nothing of value behind, not while there's a chance they can preserve it for the future. A few important possessions of the HPC are entirely inhuman, though. The Collective's paranoia surges with each new terror retrieved from dead worlds — alien weapons of mass destruction, the frightful monuments of civilization-murder, and the indecipherable archives that speak to minds with which humankind might never find common ground. The Collective does what it can to secure or steal such alien imports, and is rather keen on Qin technology for a group devoted to isolationism from other species. Some of these dangers get locked away in Preservation Arcs so that no one can use them. Others, they try to reverse engineer for precious secrets that might buy humanity a little more chance of long-term survival.

And then there's the Verdigris Sphere, an object so utterly terrifying that Charente and her super-rich backers think they've concealed it from their alien adviser, though the Doyen knows full-well what lies within even the most determined mind among them. A mind-bending arrangement of verdigris metal loops that slowly swim in nauseating configurations in defiance of physics, the terror of the Sphere isn't its own capabilities — it's nothing more than a spent shell, a weapon already fired. The Collective found the Verdigris Sphere when HPC-backed astronomers spotted a star simply blink out of existence. Given the speed of light, this event happened several millennia ago; the newly recruited teleporters who defected from Upeo wa Macho gave the Collective the ability to investigate. What they found was a dead system, a sun extinguished in a single moment, and dust-blown worlds-turned-necropoli of civilizations turned to eternal, frozen night. The Sphere was all that remained of the weapon that quenched the star with such impossible speed.

The Collective now wonder if the greatest of their efforts will not be enough for humanity to survive. No matter how deep they dig, how much they preserve, it's all for naught if hostile aliens can destroy the Sun. The discovery is kicking the organization into overdrive, a stark demonstration of the threat that creeps closer with every minute wasted.

If humanity is to survive, it must be silent and hide. If the governments of the world will not listen then, perhaps, the Collective will need to choke them into quietude. The ends justify the means, and the HPC already possesses fortified installations in which a sustainable population can survive a nuclear winter.

The Chinese Ultimatum once threatened the world with nuclear annihilation. One faction within

the Collective's inner circle now espouses this as a *necessity*, a reset button that they must press before far greater dangers arrive and bring certain obliteration. Teams of fanatics are at work manufacturing potential scenarios for nuclear Armageddon, through provocations, the theft of armaments, the use of genetic research to try and provoke *more* Aberrant eruptions rather than less, and another half-dozen nightmare scenarios they are exploring.

After all, the Collective believes it will survive. Thus, so will humanity.

And all that matters is that humanity must survive.

PSI NIPPON

That the dissidents who make up Psi Nippon are unhappy is an understatement. Unknowingly robbed of their potential for reasons they have no say in and suppressed by a government that gives no explanation for its actions, these Nihonjin have a right to feel slighted. To the Nihonjin government, Psi Nippon is a potentially explosive problem as the group has an arguably legitimate gripe. The government knows that none of the dissidents will test positive for latency — or any other troublesome power — but it can't risk the outside world uncovering the secret genetic alterations forced upon its unknowing citizens. The Nihonjin government knows all too well that history rarely looks kindly upon such experimentations, even where the perpetrators insist their actions were for the greater good. Therefore, backed into a corner of its own making, the government labels Psi Nippon as troublemakers at best and as violent criminals — even terrorists — at worst.

The twofold problem with this approach is that Psi Nippon is not a unified or monolithic entity in any sense, and that the group has many sympathizers outside the home islands. Even many people within Nippon identify with the Psi Nippon brand to some degree, believing in the 22nd century that people should choose their own fates and receive testing if they desire. Few see themselves as enemies of the government, just that they oppose the public policy oppressing people's freedoms and rights.

The opposition to policy is another headache for the government. Nippon functions as efficiently as it does partly because people feel safe, secure, and compliant. A reasonable number of citizens still remember the times before the arcology and the dark period when the Aberrant War raged outside the walls. These people agree that life is better now — even if it is subject to more control. Their influence has until recently calmed the younger generation who never knew anything but automated comfort and security. To the government's disgust, the changes psions have brought to the world infest society even when the alien-puppets can't directly interfere. The OpNet is too vast, and the pathways into the arcology too numerous, for Nippon to remain ignorant of how psions have helped the world and opened pathways to the stars for humanity. The Nihonjin government can't reasonably expect its citizens to not have an interest in psions, and that's the biggest problem.

FACTIONS AND LAYERS

Psi Nippon is a rallying point that means something different to many groups. Many factions and subcultures exist within Psi Nippon, each with its own goals. Some factions are more organized and cohesive than others, and even people belonging to the same faction may have no contact with and no awareness of other branches of the same faction.

Because of this chaotic arrangement, various hidden factions exist within the broader movements. These hidden subgroups are usually those more willing to engage in extreme activities or who are prosecuting secret agendas of their own. They use the more public — and law abiding — factions as cover while members of those factions have little to no idea that serpents exist within their midst.

PUBLIC PERSONA

As ever, the media shapes public perception and tends to divide Psi Nippon into four key elements. With a few exceptions, the Nihonjin government also views the group through this lens.

The least offensive part of Psi Nippon is the Nihonjin who don't see psions as a threat despite government propaganda otherwise. These citizens generally believe that if youths want to know if they carry the potential to shoot fire or read minds then the government should just let them go and find out. But if they discover their psionic potential, don't return to the arcology. This group, dominated by an older, more settled demographic, agrees with the government's position of not including psions within Nihonjin society but disagrees with forcing people to

remain within Nippon and never find out. The older generations balk at the thought of leaving the safety of the arcology, but they grew up on a diet of colorful entertainment around super-talented, larger-than-life protagonists, and if that were a possibility why wouldn't young people want to know? This exceedingly loose faction is arguably the largest but least effective in mounting any kind of change or voicing any but the quietest of protest.

The second layer is the most visible and what the average person thinks of when they hear the name "Psi Nippon." Mostly made up of young adults — and some older and adventurous souls — these are the people who just want to have freedom to make their own choices and embrace what the new world has to offer. Secretly almost every one of them wants to be a psion, to explore the stars and save humanity and return to the home islands as Nihonjin heroes. This element of Psi Nippon is angry and vocal but isn't prepared to resort to violence to achieve their goals. They're more inclined towards civil disobedience and vandalism to force the Nihonjin government to pay attention to the group. They're usually the first people caught up in police actions and arrests but are also the ones quickly released with nothing more than minor infractions for breaching the peace.

The third subset of Psi Nippon consists of those who take their anger a step further and will engage in violence and consider extreme measures if they think it will force the government's hand. They lack the patience or belief that the government will ever change its policy without direct action making it happen. They believe that the only way to achieve Psi Nippon's goals is to engage in massive disruption to the arcology, destroying key elements until the cost of denying Psi Nippon is greater than the value of treating the group as equals with valid points. People within this faction — or more accurately the fractious sub-factions that make up the layer — are on board with destruction and chaos but avoid human injury and death wherever possible. They believe the only way to gain government acceptance is by keeping blood off their hands.

SUBVERSIVE ELEMENTS

The true threats of Psi Nippon come from beyond — or within — these layers. The fourth layer of Psi Nippon isn't as blameless as the other three and includes those who would use public destruction and disruption as tactics. These extremists go beyond damage to property and believe that increasing the body count is precisely the way to force the Nihonjin government to take them seriously. They also understand that keeping the violence and disruption limited to the home islands can't succeed because the Nihonjin government has too much control and won't risk outsiders seeing their dirty laundry. Therefore, many within this faction operate outside Nippon itself, spreading the violence to Nihonjin holdings in other countries, inflicting casualties not only against the Nihonjin workers but collateral damage against whoever is nearby.

Most other people identifying as Psi Nippon are quick to denounce such elements, but as the group is hardly a united body with membership logs and bylaws, they have little influence to remove such violent individuals. The violent extremists see themselves as martyrs to the cause. Though they attract the government's most overwhelming response, they've accepted that they'll die so that future generations can see the truth and have the freedom they've never known. The problem for the Nihonjin government is that outsiders are taking notice. Publicly, other governments denounce the violence and deploy whatever measures they can to uncover perpetrators and bring them to justice. Privately, and within diplomatic circles, they wonder just what Nippon has to hide that it commits so many resources to preventing those who want latency testing from leaving. More than a few nations have turned their own talents towards discovering Nippon's secrets, giving a greater headache to the Nihonjin government.

The violence is what most concerns the public, but Psi Nippon's true threat hides within all layers. Scattered throughout the movement are those who know the truth and despise the government for it. Some are researchers who discovered the rogue research papers that the government thought buried or have pieced together the results from fragments across many articles. Others are hackers who dragged information from hidden caches and were horrified when they realized the truth of what they had found. In addition, some are those who worked in the research programs and health clinics and now suffer remorse for what they did. All these people know that Nippon tests for latency via school health clinics and destroys the potential when discovered.

Unfortunately, rectifying the problem isn't as simple as publicizing it. The Nihonjin media doesn't work for the state — it is a relatively free society, after all — but the government and SIs have tremendous control over what and how information propagates

throughout the arcology. Additionally, the Nihonjin government knew that dissidents might one day try to alert others of the truth. In response, they seeded considerable misinformation and conspiracy theories about what truly occurs within the arcology. Paranoia, racism, and sensationalized media from other countries ensured these fanciful stories have spread far and drown out anyone who tries to publish the truth.

Hidden Serpents

Psi Nippon's lack of structure and word-of-mouth membership also works in the government's favor. Nihonjin spies and saboteurs infiltrate all layers of the group, reporting intelligence on its methods, targets, and membership. These agents also influence the group as much as they can, casting doubt on the legitimacy of Psi Nippon's views and encouraging the more moderate membership to not only denounce the more extreme, but to name them to authorities and stand witness during their prosecutions.

Few of these spies are aware that the government has other, more sensitive, agents within the group. These assets include government-sanctioned saboteurs, explosives experts, and assassins. Their mission is to drive Psi Nippon to even greater acts of atrocity that inflame all governments of the world against the group and deny them any safety or support. These agents, which include a few infiltration-oriented Superiors in their number, also work to identify key influencers and rallying points within the group, and permanently silence them.

Savior's Path

Since President Uyabo's landmark policy paper of 2069, the United African Nations has been at the forefront of space industry and exploration. Not all Africans are willing to unite behind this vision. The terrorist group known as the Walkers in the Savior's Path on This One Earth opposes all human off-world endeavors, and focuses most of its righteous anger against the UAN's space-going citizens.

Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy

Depending on interpretation, Savior's Path is either a radical splinter sect or the militant arm of the *Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy* (the Malagasy Lutheran Church). When Madagascar lost its bid to host the UAN's space elevator, national sentiment toward the UAN turned bitter and never entirely returned to an even keel. FLM doctrine mirrored this trend, focusing on taking care of problems on Earth rather than expending resources on what leaders at the time termed "a hubristic race to surpass the bitter excesses of European colonialism."

Today, the FLM is Madagascar's predominant faith and has a significant presence in several other UAN member-states. It remains opposed to UAN expenditures on space efforts and advocates for the UAN to recognize the Far Nyumba and Karroo colonies as independent non-UAN nations (making both colonies' leaders rather uneasy). It's strongly bioconservative, opposing transhumanism and the development of noetic biotech. It also preaches against Aberrants, psions, true AI, and all alien species, a stance that has made it one of the few foreign faiths to establish a government-sanctioned toehold in Nippon.

It's easy to dismiss the FLM as a reactionary neo-Luddite sect but doing so would ignore the realities of its faith. Members adhere to Biblical injunctions that the heavens belong to God, not humanity (see To Touch the Face of God?, p. XX). The church's parent Lutheran doctrine stresses original sin, so intruding in the physical domain of the divine threatens heaven with the earthly corruption carried by every mortal. This surely risks God's wrath, so the FLM's opposition to space travel is a matter of grave importance to all humanity.

In the FLM's eyes, the Chromatics and the Coalition are monsters of the primal darkness beyond the lighted expanse of the heavens. By extension, the Qin are the same but hide their true nature for some alien and almost-certainly hostile purpose. The spark of the divine may once have touched the novas, but their role in humanity's intrusion into the heavens corrupted them beyond redemption. The psions are certain to fall the same way.

The FLM isn't all anti-space fervor and psionic damnation. Its highly capable medical missionary arm runs clinics across the UAN, competing handily with both biomedical metacorporations and the Æsculapian Order. The majority of its disaster relief efforts today focus on Europe, where its messages

find many converts in the grave of the *Esperanza*. It also has a surprisingly strong missionary presence in the FSA's rural areas, where it provides primary education, pastoral counseling, and local infrastructure improvements.

A LINE IN THE SAND

The Savior's Path movement emerged in 2109 as a reaction to the founding of the Karroo Mining Colony (in which Madagascar, lacking a strong mining industry, played little part). Solar system exploration and colonization were bad enough, but establishing a permanent African presence so deep in the primal darkness was an existential threat. The seat of opposition was Reverend Emiline Rabenoro's FLM congregation in Toamasina. Rabenoro had been a missionary in the FSA and had witnessed Aberrant attacks in Dallas and Taos. This left her with apocalyptic visions of the Blight, or worse, coming to Africa. She found it imperative to stem the flow of Karroo ore to the UAN lest it bring back some unfathomable, unholy hazard. On January 9th, 2110, Rabenoro and her followers hijacked a Sudanese construction ship and vectored it into a suicide attack on Abuhisi, destroying the ore freighter *Pride of Bangî* before it could dock with the station. Savior's Path had struck its first blow in defense of Earth.

Rabenoro's This One Earth Sermon, disseminated on the OpNet as she launched her attack, found derision in the general population but fertile ground within the FLM. Within a year, a score of copycat attacks had targeted space industries across the UAN and its members' orbital holdings, establishing Savior's Path as a capable and persistent threat. The psi orders' destruction of the Chitra Bhanu the following year fueled FLM and Savior's Path anti-psion propaganda. Additional surges have followed every catastrophe in space: the Chromatic attack on Karroo, *Esperanza's* fall, first contact with the Coalition.

WALKING THE PATH

Savior's Path remains a major threat in 2123. While mainstream FLM leaders publicly decry its tactics, it enjoys widespread popular support throughout the church. This gives it a broad base of funding, intelligence, and recruiting. Products of the modern UAN educational system, its leaders and operatives are students of technology and history alike. Many work in hardtech engineering or related professions, enabling the insider attacks that have become the group's hallmark.

Unlike many terrorist groups, Savior's Path selects its targets for maximum impact on space travel infrastructure rather than the media. It knows what its politics are, it knows how the rest of humanity sees it, and it knows the impossibility of changing hearts and minds through large explosions. The fact that its successes do make international news is a beneficial (to it) side effect, not the main result. Body count is less important than damage and difficulty of recovery. When it does engage in assassination, it usually

TO TOUCH THE FACE OF GOD?

Various Christian groups have opposed space exploration since its inception. Their views hinged on interpretations of passages such as Genesis 1:28 (which gives humanity dominion over the creatures of sea, air, and earth, but says nothing about life on other worlds) and Psalm 115:16 (which grants the earth to the children of man but marks the heavens as the Lord's). Some even applied pseudoscience to Chapter 1 of the Book of Ezekiel, taking "evidence" that angels were engaged in space travel to proclaim it off-limits to mortals. They also held that spaceflight was a waste of resources better spent on terrestrial ministry. They hold up pioneering space programs' tragedies like Apollo 1, Soyuz 11, *Challenger*, Zhinü 15, and *Galatea* as evidence of these beliefs, if not proof of God's displeasure at those whose hubris led them to reach for His domain.

By the late Nova Age, the space industry's maturation and the increasing number of extrasolar colonies had led most mainstream religions to officially sanction their faithful's off-world travels. The Vatican's Outward Vision Proclamation of 2039 provided guidance for Catholic rites performed off Earth, three years after the Jeddah Islamic Summit issued guidance for prayer on other worlds and extrasolar alternatives to the Hajj. Some groups threw themselves into spreading their faiths to the stars, such as the Indonesian Mennonites whose influence on Marfisa far outweighs their actual numbers and the American Mormons who founded the now-lost colony of Fletcher's World. In 2123, faith is a part of everyday life in space and the FLM is a rare minority among the faithful.

targets key researchers whose deaths will set back knowledge in space-related areas. It's also made at least two attempts to destroy the Qin embassy.

In addition to direct action, Savior's Path is very good at information warfare. Through its members' connections to the UAN media industry, it sporadically seeds entertainment holovids with memes that highlight the hazards of space travel and extrasolar colonization. These clues lead potential believers in as recruits as much as any FLM missionary efforts. Savior's Path also covers its OpNet tracks well, which continues to frustrate UAN security authorities.

The organization's strongest support is in Madagascar but has cells throughout the UAN and, more recently, in Europe. It also has cells off Earth. These are among the most dangerous, as their members — Farthest Walkers in Savior's Path parlance — have accepted martyrdom in the primal darkness. They're in space to strike decisive blows against the very ships and industries that got them there, and they're willing to wait years for opportunities to do the most damage.

The UAN continues to trace and sever sources of international support. The greatest suspect is the FSA. While the FSA has officially listed Savior's Path as a terrorist organization due to threats against its own space-based industries, the country's hostility toward the UAN and history of supporting other terrorist groups are, as they say, clues. There are also indications that Nihonjin intelligence services are building a relationship with Savior's Path due to their shared paranoias. Most troublingly, a recent raid on a Savior's Path safehouse in Dar es Salaam yielded several dead terrorists — one of whom, upon autopsy, was a previously-unknown model of Qin biosuit (an infiltrator; **Trinity Continuum: Æon**, pp. 351-355). UAN authorities are holding off on contacting the Qin until they decide if the casualty was involved in a Qin operation against Savior's Path or a House Kuei attempt to drive wedges between humanity and its alien allies.

SPACE PIRATES — GHOSTS IN THE DARKNESS

Humanity has left the confines of Earth and taken to the stars. Hard vacuum, deadly radiation, and freezing temperature aren't the only dangers faced in the blackness of space. Even in the relatively busy space between Earth and Luna predators lurk in the darkness. Haunting the darkness, ready to strike the unwary, pirates await. The endless black hasn't changed the core elements of these ruthless, death-defying individuals, always one misfortune away from instant death in the most hostile environment known.

OLD PROFESSION, NEW FRONTIERS

Piracy is nothing new. Throughout history, wherever people have traveled far from home, moving valuable cargo through isolated areas far from safety and support networks, others took advantage to overwhelm defenses and take the goods for themselves. The dangerous cat-and-mouse game pirates play of strike and fade runs just as well in the void between worlds. The distances are greater, the risks more numerous, and the environment far more deadly than any before it, but while the opportunity for profit exists someone will try to be the one to make it.

For Joe Hologram on Earth, space piracy is a romantic notion that only appears in trashy OpNet dramas and lurid novels. The common person thinks that the psi orders — especially the 7th Legion — vigilantly patrols the space lanes to protect ships moving between planets, moons and stations. In essence, this is true; various authorities do patrol common routes and respond to threats and emergencies. However, despite what the public thinks, these protectors can't be everywhere, and they're on the lookout for more than just pirates. The Firebirds watching for danger are often more concerned with responding to Quantum spikes and searching for Aberrant activity in the solar system (and beyond) to divert resources towards human piracy.

Other navies, less well equipped to deal with an Aberrant menace, fill the gap but are often more concerned with national interests and the needs of those who pay their wages. International agreements backed by the UN do exist, codifying agreed practices including the requirement for all vessels to respond to emergencies as they can. That final clause provides substantial leeway for individual ships, convoys, or fleets to decide what response they can provide. Many argue that they don't have the capabilities or weaponry to assist in instances like pirate attacks, and that if they did so they're merely be giving the pirates another profitable vessel to overwhelm and steal.

EARTH AND LUNA

Piracy near Earth and Luna is rarer than further out in the system, but it still happens. The space between these two hubs of human civilization has a denser flow of vessels moving between one and the other, or more frequently between Luna and Earth-orbit stations or the space elevator. This also means a greater presence of patrols from spacefaring nations looking to protect their interests. However, even though passage between Earth and Luna has become so commonplace that most Earthlings barely consider the two to be separate "planets," there's still a vast amount of distance in the journey, just shy of 400,000 kilometers. Most freighters and cargo vessels — the pirates' preferred prey — take one or two days to cover the distance, and SIs more than capable of handling the random situations that occur on such routine paths comprise the entire crew of many. Electronic pilots reduce the need for life support or atmospheric control, depending on the fragility and packaging of the cargo.

These automated cargo haulers are generally just one in a series of regular transport departures and don't have the imperative to complete the journey more quickly — they deliver the same kinds of goods received within the last few days and another delivery will follow in a few days more. As an additional safeguard, if something happens that's more than the SI can manage, the communications delay to a human controller for input of override is usually less than a second as the SI reaches out to the closest of Luna or Earth. Any delay isn't ideal but is usually enough to manage situations that far from anyone, and if the emergency occurs in the more congested space closer to departure or arrival the shorter distance makes response near-real time anyway.

In contrast, passenger craft must contend with human patience and travel much faster — and charge

much more — so they can offload their customers before the novelty of spending half a day or more in a small space surrounded by the most hostile environment wears thin. Passengers usually warrant human pilots as well, as reassurance against mishap. Few of these pilots advertise the fact that they also let the ship SI do all the work except in extreme emergencies.

To the pirates waiting in the void, each ship's behavior, life support function and temperature signatures are as good as broadcasting a cargo manifest when it comes to picking targets.

HUMAN GOODS

Perhaps surprisingly, these modern pirates have little interest in taking prisoners for ransom or to sell. Human trafficking still exists in the 23rd century but an empowered UN backed by psionic forces and Æon hit the trade hard. Few pirates understand the intricacies of how psi works or precisely what effects different Aptitudes can achieve, but they have a general idea that connectivity and familiarity are powerful tools in the psions' arsenal.

Taking prisoners means lost loved ones and emotional intimacies that can lead back to the thieves and track and locate the pirates' hidden strongholds. Authorities are more likely to diligently pursue thieves who kidnap people or generate too high a body count than they are to track those stealing physical goods that are often insured against such mishap. As long as pirates don't strike too often and alter the financial calculations so cost of hunting is no longer less than cost of replacing, they're relatively safe. Taking physical goods only reduces the risk of a psionic connection for any but the rarest artifacts.

Pirates who do inadvertently capture prisoners face a tough decision. Those beyond the Earth-Luna space generally employ extreme ruthlessness to safeguard against retribution. These deep space killers are more likely to vent all crew and passengers into space than allow survivors as witnesses. Zero life signs and cold flesh against the infinite backdrop of space are almost impossible to find without psionic assistance, and even that tends to fade quickly against such dramatic changes.

Pirates not operating in deep space are less heartless, again not for altruistic reasons but simply for their own long-term survival. Few things urge nations to divert resources to hunting pirates than the murder of their citizens, and a string of such activity attracts the Phoenix Fleet's attention regardless of nationality.

To protect themselves, pirates who permit prisoners to live usually destroy any communications equipment or distress beacons and set the ships on a powered course away from the established space lanes. A ship burning hot against the cold background of space is easily discoverable by anyone looking for it, but the time needed for rescuers to reach the vessel and rescue the lost passengers should reduce the connection from the ship or passengers to the pirates. That's the pirate's hope, anyway. It's an imperfect plan but so far appears to work.

REMAINING HIDDEN

The space pirate's business model works because they're hard to find in the infinite blackness. Even the well-traveled near-Earth paths include centuries of accumulated junk from discarded or damaged satellites, discarded rocket boosters, and a multitude of wrecked ships left in the wake of the Aberrant War. Every scrap of history from centuries of human near-space exploitation now serves to cloud and obscure the other threats that await.

Planet-bound people tend to forget that, unlike transport between nations on Earth, planets are in constant motion and Luna's relative position to any point on Earth, or most stations, always varies. The realities of orbital mechanics and thrust mean that ships between the two — and any other planet — are always graceful arcs that aren't traveling to where the destination is now, but to where it's calculated to be by the time the ship arrives. Modern thrusters and fusion engines have vastly increased the amount of power available to pilots, but the realities of planetary motion still apply. The only straight path between planets is via teleporters.

This means two things: First, moving things from one place to another isn't like the highways or even wet shipping lanes of old. Thousands of tiny sparks burning their way along whichever calculated paths to their destination populate the void between Luna and Earth. Unless they departed the same place at the same time and the same thrust vector, each ship is alone. More frequently, at least thousands of kilometers separate ships all spiraling away from their points of origin. Secondly, even with all this traffic, if something goes wrong, if pirates strike a lonely target, it's unlikely that any protective response is close enough to intercede and protect the victim. The best they can usually hope for is that rescuers will arrive in time to save them from dying.

The hot trails of fusion drives are easy to track against space's cold background, which is a

problem near-Earth pirates must solve. A rare few use Aberrant-era technology to mask their presence, providing thrust without heated reaction mass — sometimes without any understandable means of propulsion at all! Pirates sometimes find these artifacts in the same junk that obscures their presence, scattered in orbit waiting for some desperate or opportunistic crew to find them. Quantum weaponry, advanced thrust or shielding systems, even point-to-point teleportation changes the game in the pirates' favor. Even rarer are those pirates with psionic or Aberrant powers of their own who can circumvent the need for fusion thrust for a time. Authorities who learn of pirates deploying such devices — or powers —move them into a higher category of threat. These pirates need every advantage the devices provide when Æon and the psi orders come hunting for the prohibited technology.

Most pirates operating in Earth-Luna space avoid detection through technical ingenuity and patience. They use their fusion drives sparingly and install large heat sinks on their vessels to trap waste warmth when they shutdown the reactors. Space pirates surf the turbulent gravity well between planet and moon, hiding in the darkness, just another blip amongst the blanket of orbital junk. When they strike, they run their fusion drives hot, bleeding the trapped heat from their sinks while lit up against the cold, hitting their targets fast and burning away before shutting down and disappearing again. As soon as they're running dark, the pirates use ancient-technology — thrusters to vent cold gas to alter their course to prevent predictability. At this point, pirates once again ride the invisible swirls and eddies, where complicated gravitational interactions meet physical momentum.

Operating close to Earth and Luna is difficult and dangerous, even with these tactics. Most space pirates don't survive long. Rivals or the authorities soon kill or capture the vast majority. Those who live long enough to make a career become some of the most intuitive, talented pilots in human space.

PRIVATEERS

As much as the UN would prefer otherwise, not every pirate ship is merely a criminal enterprise. Emulating ages past, some nations supply what amounts to modern-day letters of marque to daring and morally flexible individuals willing to risk their ships for profit. In exchange for giving safe harbor and places to refuel, repair, and take on supplies, these nations expect to have a say in what targets their privateers attack, and a guarantee of safety for vessels registered to that country. Some nations also require their privateers to act as a deniable show of strength to punish a citizen who has lost favor or stepped out of line.

Unsurprisingly, many people (correctly) believe the FSA supports pirates and provides registration and safe harbor for vessels working in its interest. Other nations are just as likely to endorse some privateers under their flags. Some space faring nations use these privateers in much the same way as the FSA, while others keep privateers on the payroll as a measure of protection as well as an arms-length means of securing payback for the actions of rival nations.

Several privateers earn a comfortable lifestyle through conducting very few raids, instead taking payments from a range of "customers" to avoid their ships. Some even work to protect their customer's interests, for a reasonable bonus fee. The wealthiest and most successful of these privateers work for many nations, earning more through inactivity than they would gain from risky adventure. Such a broad customer base does carry associated risk of individual customers becoming displeased with refusal to harass the ships of another customer. Privateers working this business model walk a fine line between keeping their pockets lined and suddenly facing the wrath of unhappy clients who know their ships' abilities, or who can invite them into traps under the guise of just another business meeting.

SPACE PIRATE (ROLE)

Your character has sailed through the void, preying on the goods or lives of others for her living. Maybe she now seeks redemption for her previous misdeeds or has found a better life helping instead of taking. Either way, your character may need to keep looking over her shoulder, ever alert to authorities or the villains she left behind catching up to her.

Connections: 7th Legion Pilot, Interplanetary Transport Workers, Space Pirates, Spaceship Maintenance Technicians

Skills: Aim, Larceny, Pilot, Technology

Edges: Adrenaline Spike, Alternate Identity, Breath Control, Danger Sense, Hair Trigger Reflexes, Safe House, Skilled Liar, Small Unit Tactics, Variable Gravity Training, Weak Spots, Wealth

TWELVE-MILE LIMIT

Conventional wisdom holds that outside the 22.2-kilometer (12-mile) traditional limit of territorial waters, there is no law. Actual jurisdictional issues are more complex, but the rulers of the floating city named for the 12-mile rule have taken all the high seas to be their playground.

Twelve-Mile Limit was born from the construction of the Tokyo Bay Weave (p. XX). An incomplete arco-island broke loose from its moorings during Typhoon Chaba in 2088. Nihonjin authorities relinquished any responsibility for it once the winds swept it out of their domain, and a quick-thinking salvage crew from Alaska boarded and stabilized it as it drifted eastward via the Kuroshio Current.

The Alaskans' original plan was to establish an offshore haven for Trumerican and Canadian dissidents, but they quickly realized they'd captured a white elephant. Without the arcology engineering experience necessary to complete the project, they were hard-pressed to keep their salvage project afloat. They needed partners with technical skills and a massive amount of capital.

Salvation came in the form of McMeckan & Blackwood, an Australian engineering firm that had recently constructed several offshore habitats in the Tasman Sea. The corporation offered to complete the original development plan for the arco-island, making it an elite destination for the Pacific Rim's resurgent hyper-rich. Their eyes clouded by visions of wealth, the Alaskans realized too late that they'd just partnered with Perth's dominant organized crime family.

Today, Twelve-Mile Limit is a micronation recognized only by Oceania (and that's mainly a matter of principle). It moves annually, getting under way at dawn on New Year's Day. Its mooring site for 2123 is near the sunken grave of Singapore, just outside Malaysian territorial waters.

PARTY LIKE IT'S 2099

The popular media image of Twelve-Mile Limit (reinforced, to be sure, by the micronation's own marketing) portrays it as the party that never ends, a place with no rules and subject to no nation's jurisdiction, where every night is an unholy debauch and every day a sun-drenched tropical hangover recovery. In truth, most visitors are here for the appearance of unrestricted hedonism rather than the reality of it, and their own inhibitions keep them from doing anything too extreme. Tourist deaths are also bad for business, so Twelver security is adept at subtle interventions before most situations get too dangerous.

For the general public, Twelve-Mile Limit's main attractions are its dance clubs and casinos, along with the rivers of recreational chemicals flowing through them. Of equal importance to the bottom line is the plethora of ultra-secure meeting facilities it offers to both legitimate and extralegal businesspeople. The governing syndicate's privacy guarantee isn't a matter of "what happens on Twelve-Mile Limit..." so much as "nothing ever happened on Twelve-Mile Limit."

This latter element of Twelver business means they strictly forbid all recording technologies more sophisticated than a paintbrush, save for the arcology's own security systems. The only exceptions are dedicated holography decks and a single nightclub where tourists can document their visits. Everywhere else, the best counter-surveillance technology money can buy ensures the micronation's evidence-free promise.

This same discretion makes Twelve-Mile Limit a premiere offshore banking hub, and its casinos' massive cashflow optimizes its money-laundering capacity. There isn't a law enforcement agency on the planet that isn't desperate to get into Twelve-Mile Limit's data vaults.

TWELVERS

Twelve-Mile Limit can accommodate up to 30,000 guests, though usually it runs at half to two-thirds occupancy. Peak tourist times include local holidays in whatever country the arco-island moors itself next to, the infamous New Year's celebration, and the typhoon parties that occur whenever a major tropical storm approaches. The local hospitality industry and other enterprises based here give the micronation a permanent population of 8,000, including the following parties of interest. Counting affiliates of the micronation who work elsewhere but hold Twelver passports, Twelve-Mile Limit has about 11,000 citizens.

MCMECKAN & BLACKWOOD

This Australian corporation still owns a majority share in the arcology, having moved its headquarters

STORYGUIDE TOOLKIT: BREAKING THE TWELVE-MILE LIMIT

Twelve-Mile Limit is both better and worse than it sounds. Its advertising portrays it as a sin-sodden, no-limits getaway for the rich and famous — and, in its less-exclusive venues, for anyone else who can afford the travel and admission. The stories of what happens here are probably all true but exaggerate the frequency of the most egregious violations and excesses. Most visitors don't do anything here that they couldn't do in Rio, Bangkok, or Prague, but they go home with the notoriety of doing it on Twelve-Mile Limit. Not incidentally, 20,000 innocent bystanders are a hell of a deterrent to overt action against HZS (p. XX), something the syndicate considers (but doesn't rely on to the exclusion of other options) in its defense planning.

On the other hand, Twelve-Mile Limit is the Switzerland of international crime: scrupulously neutral, with excellent financial services. Its anonymity and security mean conversations end peacefully here that, anywhere else in the world, would end with blood on the ceiling. Everyone who comes here is human (at least until the first Qin shows up to watch), and they come with human frailties. With the arcology's superior counter-surveillance systems in place, spies and investigators must fall back on old-school tradecraft to learn what they need to know. It's 2123's ultimate playground for classic high-stakes espionage. The threat isn't Twelve-Mile Limit itself — it's the organizations and interests that intersect here.

here in 2101. McM&B specializes in aquatic mega-engineering and holds contracts with several Oceanian member-states. As a showpiece for the firm's capabilities, Twelve-Mile Limit remains in pristine condition and it swiftly resolves even the smallest maintenance issue. When Twelve-Mile Limit needs to move, McM&B uses its own seagoing tugs, trusting no one else to handle the work.

Officially, McM&B is the micronation's governing body. Its president is the arco-island's chief executive, its board of directors the cabinet, and its shareholders the legislature. Several corporate space habitats have adopted a convenient parallelism for their own autonomous governance. It's also complete fiction. Australian authorities and most criminal organizations know McM&B is a front for Twelve-Mile Limit's real rulers.

THE HARRIS-ZHANG SYNDICATE

Formed in 2098 by an unlikely marriage, HZS unified the largest Anglo and Chinese organized crime families in Perth. Over the following decade, the syndicate spun off subsidiaries to handle most of its street-level operations, focusing its core efforts on Twelve-Mile Limit's profitability and ensuring its immunity to government intervention. The modern HZS is that rarest of criminal enterprises: a support services provider to other organized criminal groups, directly operating almost no illegal activities of its own.

Headquartered on the arco-island, HZS still maintains satellite offices in Perth. It also has "consulates" around the Pacific Rim to ensure smooth relations and unbroken lines of communication with its many partners.

VANCOUVER FAR EAST FREEHOLD

The salvage operators retain a minority share of Twelve-Mile Limit, and they never gave up on their dream of making the arco-island a separatist haven. Unfortunately, its usual haunts are a little far from Federated shores, so not many rebels choose to relocate to tropical seas. Four hundred disaffected Trumericans and Canadians live here. They're a source of funding and other aid that flows via smuggling routes to dissidents along the American west coast. They also arrange extractions and new identities for people wanted by the FSA.

RIPTIDE

This community of 250 aquas leases parts of the arco-island's S5 through S8 subsurface levels for living space. They earn legitimate income as subcontractors for arcology maintenance and operations, but their main enterprise is smuggling. They operate four low-observable flying subs and have connections in aqua communities throughout the South Pacific.

KATAPHRAKTOI

Formerly based in NTP-occupied Greece, this private security firm relocated to Twelve-Mile Limit in 2119 after the Turks arrested half their

senior partners for alleged weapons smuggling. Kataphraktoi specializes in site security and personal protection, but it'll delve into the darker side of military contracting if the price is right. Notably, almost a quarter of its 200 employees are psions, including the ex-Sixth Legion founders. Kataphraktoi is under long-term contract to supplement McM&B/HZS security on the arco-island and at least 60 personnel are present (though, obviously, not always on duty) at any time while the rest work contracts elsewhere in the world. There's a bloody history between the company and the Second Legion, and smart members of any Legion won't come to Twelve-Mile Limit on leave.

POINTS OF INTEREST

With a surface area of about three-and-a-half square kilometers, Twelve-Mile Limit is tiny even as micronations go. However, with 10 subsurface levels, a 30-story central tower, and four lesser towers, it packs a fair amount of living and function space into its tiny footprint.

ABYSS

The arco-island's lowest subsurface level, S10, houses one of its more unique dance clubs. Constructed of artificial sapphire, Abyss' walls and floor provide clubgoers an unparalleled view of the surrounding ocean. Lights, pheromone emitters, and ultrasonics ensure the local sea life is always close by. Several moon pools allow aquas direct access to the water, and gillbreather rental is available for others to share the experience. A couple of Riptide lifeguards are on duty to ensure novices don't get in over their proverbial heads.

AMAZON MAX

Twelve-Mile Limit's most popular casino occupies a four-story tower located one edge of the hexagonal arco-island. Inside, the structure is a single open space, terraced along its inner faces and crisscrossed with delicate plasteel skywalks. Extensive biotech support systems maintain a habitat for carefully selected tropical plants, birds, and reptiles. To maximize patron comfort, skilled genetic engineers modified these species to thrive in temperature and humidity levels more comfortable for guests than tropical forests.

Like the rest of Twelve-Mile Limit's casinos, Amazon Max deals harshly but non-violently with cheaters — it confiscates everything they brought with them to Twelve-Mile Limit, issues them a cheap jumpsuit, holds them for several days, and requires them to pay a stiff fine before releasing them. Rumors suggest that Amazon Max employs at least one clairsentient to help detect cheating. However, it welcomes skilled

BEST BEHAVIOR

Only HZS' most trusted security agents have seen Best Behavior, the Novatech enforcer of Terra Nullius' code of neutrality. The most reliable rumors paint it as a small device, concealed within one of the venue's many works of art... or built into the table in the main conference room... or placed behind the bar mirror. Then again, rumors also say the effect really comes from disguised Qin who work security in exchange for the opportunity to observe human criminal customs.

Best Behavior operates on unknown principles, generating its behavioral constraint field in a tunable volume currently set to the entirety of Terra Nullius. Simply put, it enforces good manners of the sort expected in high-class European society two centuries ago. Sentient beings within its field may not give voice to overt hostility, intentionally lie, or attempt physical (or psionic) harm or damage. Best Behavior has a dice pool of nine for detecting these offenses, respectively at Difficulty 4, 2, and 1. The device keys on intent, not effect. This means truly accidental harm flies under its radar, but the Storyguide is fully within their rights to shut down rules-lawyering over whether something really constitutes "harm." All attack actions are triggers, even if the character returns fire in self-defense.

Whenever Best Behavior detects prohibited intent, it induces neurological trauma in the offender at the speed of thought, taking effect before the offending action is resolved. This is a direct attack with a dice pool of eight, which the offender resists with Composure. Even if the offender suffers no damage, the offending action still incurs a headache-based Complication whose level equals the number of offenses the character has committed during the current scene (maximum four). Each distinct offending action or statement triggers a separate response from Best Behavior.

Best Behavior isn't infallible. Lies of omission fall outside its influence, as do evasions, outright refusals to address sensitive issues, and subtle or well-veiled insults. Additionally, no one has yet found the loophole in its violence prohibitions: It does not constrain formal duels, so long as both parties honor a mutually accepted dueling code. Finally, HZS *is* aware that Mind Shield (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 250) has its normal effect against Best Behavior.

gamblers who don't cheat, even those who seem inhumanly lucky. Workers and frequent patrons still talk about how infamous gambler Huck Novotny won several million yuan at blackjack last year.

THE MAHOGANY GALLERY

One of several wood-themed auditoriums scattered through the main tower, the Mahogany Gallery usually serves as an auction hall. From Rock Island Arsenal to Orbital Heritage Limited, some of the world's most exclusive collectibles pass across its stage. Broadcasters vie for the rights to solar-system-wide live coverage of the more notable annual events. On the other hand, the Mahogany Gallery also hosts several very private auctions a year of forbidden items: suppressed histories, Code Indigo bioapps, Chromatic battlefield salvage, Nova Age artifacts. HZS has ramped up its screening and containment after the late 2120 release of a polymorphic nanosurgeon swarm that rebuilt four people into parrot-human hybrids.

OPERATIONS CORE

Extending from levels 6 to S4, the arco-island's infrastructure center includes wastewater treatment, hydroponics (for both fresh vegetables and psychoactive products), three hyperfusion reactors, and all of the services and maintenance functions necessary to keep Twelve-Mile Limit running smoothly. This area also houses HZS' financial data vaults and the offices in which the syndicate handles the banking interests of dozens of other criminal enterprises. Security here is as competent and professional as anywhere on Earth. Past the outer layer, it's also lethal, on the assumption that no intruder "accidentally" got past the armored hatches, sentry SIs, and slamhound (p. XX) handlers.

TERRA NULLIUS

In stark contrast to the entertainment venues elsewhere in the complex, this is a quiet, well-appointed lounge and bar with an air of history far in excess of

its actual years. While the entire arco-island is neutral ground for organized crime families, HZS and Kataphraktoi security specialists take special pains to ensure Terra Nullius' inviolability. Located on level 27, Terra Nullius is restricted to the heads of HZS' peer syndicates and those subordinates whose good conduct they personally guarantee.

This is the place where Earth's underworld lords seal their pacts and bury their vendettas. On this unhallowed ground, conversations *must* be civil, negotiations *must* be in good faith, and no party may lift a finger in aggression — conditions enforced by a Nova Age device that projects a telempathic behavioral constraint field. Violators first suffer seizures, then death by massive cerebral hemorrhage. More than one crime lord has prematurely elevated his successor by attempting to circumvent Terra Nullius' protections. About once a year, someone tries a new approach and gets to serve as a reminder to his colleagues.

THE WHITE MIRROR SOCIETY

It's something of an open secret that organized crime in China exists solely subject to the government's tolerance. With a bureau of telepaths capable of monitoring any breaches of the tacit agreements between triads and state, the big gangs have grown somnolent and complacent, their activities vetted by the very polity whose laws they breach. Yet one triad in particular defies the conventions that rule China's underbelly since the Aberrant War, pursuing a bloody trail of retribution against its former peers. Ministry telepaths can't watch for the schemes of this notorious gang by reading the minds of its leadership, because the masterminds behind the conspiracy are all dead — and have been for years.

The White Mirror Society is a distributed system that exists on a biological, digital, and societal level. Its creators carefully buried it in the same labyrinthine interconnection of Aberrant-encoded precepts upon which China's governance still rests today. All manner of people serve the Society, but most do so briefly and unwittingly. It has no regular membership, no formal hierarchy, and no base of operations. The White Mirror Society is perhaps closest to a cultural virus, pushing cascades of consequences into play that result in crime, havoc, and brutal demonstrations of vengeance against those who once crossed its creators.

When the Chinese government offered its ultimatum to the triads during the Aberrant War, not everyone was willing to play along. The response was usually swift and brutal, but the handful of Talents among the holdouts were, of course, improbably likely to survive state suppression and escape to lick their wounds. Several such survivors came together to form the foundations of the White Mirror Society, planning to recover, rebuild, and return with fresh strength. While these Talents didn't truly understand their own nature, the group's uncanny skills and fortune continued to draw in *other* Talents among the populace in resistance to the authoritarian state. Seeing the surviving triads as complicit traitors, the Society waged a low-key gang war until the emergence of the psi orders.

The White Mirror Society now faced what seemed an unbeatable foe. Ministry telepaths could crack the minds of even the most loyal of foot soldiers, and the government could now pick up on ripples in the Bodhisattva's labyrinthine legislations caused by crime to a far greater extent than ever before — enough to challenge even a Talent's skills. The solution the Society's leadership came up with was equally brilliant, deranged, and extreme. Telepaths meant that people were now weak points in the Society's structure, so members needed to eliminate those weak points.

With their Gifts, the Society's Talents engineered a many-pronged program that continued after their deaths. They wrote self-evolving data-subversion packages and wove compromising ontological conundrums into public system Satisfactory Intelligences. They ran analyses to pick out key individuals among the masses whose actions they could incite to begin domino chains of seemingly unconnected consequences. They gathered blackmail material, bequeathed endowments, filled bank accounts with funds that SI agents would only release under cryptic circumstances, and stored caches of armaments. From all these pieces, the Society wove a tapestry of probable predicted events on the grand scale and built a framework of minor course-corrections and situational decision-making via probability, compromised SIs, and specific people who would never realize that life-and-death outcomes would hang off their seemingly innocuous choices.

Some of the finest, angriest, most anarchic minds that the government had ignored or sought to crush under its boot-heel came together and forged this magnificent, monstrous work of inspiration. Even with so much aptitude, it took years to engineer. The day that the new, transfigured White Mirror Society activated, all it took to start toppling the chain of dominoes was a single red envelope and, soon after, the first killing.

The Society has become a boogeyman in the Chinese criminal underworld, a figure of fear. Some say the White Mirror Society all killed themselves in ritual suicide. Others claim they withdrew to live out the rest of their lives in remote solitude. Whatever the truth, they no longer control the Society and have no further influence over its actions. It is a complex probability engine running under its own power, ruthlessly pushing towards its cruel goals.

THOSE WHO LOOK INTO THE WHITE MIRROR

The White Mirror Society does not have much in the way of conventional structure. The Talents who engineered it are dead or gone. It does not maintain gangs of thugs. The closest analogy as to how the Society functions is the mysterious aid and "lucky" coincidences through which ISRA works its influence, albeit where ISRA functions through the hard work of clairvoyant scions, the Society is a distributed probability network with innumerable computer programs, SIs, and people as its unwitting components.

Seeds sown 15 years ago still bear fruit. A payment lands in a man's bank account like clockwork, and so he in turn always puts a particular message up on a specific OpNet community, with no knowledge of who cares to read it nor why. A minor bureaucrat appends a specific tag onto the state database of orphans and homes because the man who trained her told her to — something to do with an old piece of software that wasn't completely compatible — and he, in turn, did it because *his* tutor told him to. A woman waits in a small apartment, caught between sobbing misery and seething fury, and when the surveillance system notifies a Ministry agent of a potential unstable element in society, a slumbering subroutine wakes up and splits off a copy to another, silent address.

The man who passes messages onto couriers and smugglers, the bureaucrat who flags up potential recruits, the woman who can't stop herself from committing murder later that same day; none of them are White Mirror Society, and yet they all are.

The Ministry does what it can to root out the traces of the Society, but most agents of its will — inasmuch as it has a will — have no notion of the bigger picture. Some are petty criminals, eager to conduct a particular transgression as part of the White Mirror's chain of events, but they're disposable and exchangeable in the grand scheme of things. No living mind possesses the Society's scheme, or even a major part of it, so no telepath can truly map it out. No single server houses one satisfactory intelligence driving the whole thing forward. No message spells out the entire plan. The White Mirror Society has weaponized the very fact that no one truly understands how and why the Bodhisattva's systems work, hiding within their complexity.

Perhaps the strangest aspect of the White Mirror Society is that it continues to attract and draw in Talents. How and why this happens may be something to do with the nature of Flux and the manner in which the distributed probability network of the Society handles risk assessment within itself. Regardless, the Society is quick to wrap its influence around such key nodes. Inasmuch as there is a meaningful membership of the triad, it is a tier of such Talents who have found themselves roped into its schemes — daring criminals willing to defy even the Ministry, gamblers chancing their luck for a big score, killers without compare. Rather than discarding them, the Society attempts to use these Talents again and again — a high-risk, high-reward approach — and they therefore tend to run into each other. They build their own connections, and some start to piece together what's going on.

They might be the biggest threat to the White Mirror Society, because their Gifts offer them the chance to stop just being pawns and to influence the triad in turn.

VENGEFUL PURPOSE

The White Mirror Society is principally a vehicle for vengeance. Its initial purpose was the extermination of those triads who fell in line with the government, whom the Society's founders saw as traitors or cowards. The Talents fed lists of names into analytical programs, hid them as encrypted codes in databases, and carved synonyms of their identities into the keystones of buildings. Unleashed, the Society got to work killing them. A freak accident where a construction worker received the wrong measurements

for the composite mixture here, a chance encounter between a Red Pole and a murderous ex-lover there, the bloody and graphic vivisection of a target by a man willing to do *anything* for his heart's desire elsewhere. The White Mirror Society is a clockwork wound to inflict the relentless destruction of its foes, slowly unwinding over the years. Potential victims can't reason with it or frighten it off. The people who do its bloody handiwork offer no leverage against it.

The Society is not a perfect tool of vengeance. It often misses its mark, but the Ministry has no idea how many times it fails because even failed event chains are indistinguishable from the general background noise of society; the vulnerable young man who the Society intends to turn into a killer never picks up that knife after all, and instead determines to repair his life. Its process is also necessarily slow, built on repeated calculations and the results of innumerable probability gates.

Like unwinding clockwork, it's also running out of impetus. In a predictable yet surreal turn of events, the Society has to rely on regular crime to keep itself going. Each month, it must still make payments to critical decision nodes. It needs fresh leverage to offer to vulnerable fulcrums — new drugs still illegal even under China's permissive laws, newly identified debts owed to the bloated triad accounts, new threats to levy that will strike home. It even does business with Aberrant cults. The White Mirror Society quietly orchestrates smuggling and other illegal activities because, ultimately, they pay the bills. Even a distributed probability network needs to keep the metaphorical lights on.

These extracurricular activities are easier for the Ministry to dig up than the Society's monomaniacal plots to murder triads, and as the Society's foundation of resources dries up and it turns more and more to such efforts, telepaths remain a significant obstacle to its purpose. Increasingly, the Society begins to target Ministry agents as opponents who it needs to remove. It's not so much that the Society *wants* to engage the Ministry; it doesn't *want* anything, but the answers to particular online surveys, the databases used by specific smugglers, and the line-up of paper dolls in one window all combine to push its decision-making process towards conflict.

The result is a vicious circle that's building up impetus. The Society killed a telepath via a car crash by overriding traffic control in Shanghai last year; Ministry efforts to clamp down on the rogue triad redoubled. Threatened by several successes in tracking down Talent operatives, the Society murdered more telepaths, and in turn the scrutiny grew ever greater. Now the unthinking yet hyper-intelligent organization seeks tools to further its survival. A shipment of weapons vanishes, only to turn up in the hands of dissidents — a surprise gift they weren't expecting but are quite willing to use. A domino effect of havoc spreads when the subsonic sound systems in a major urban area go haywire, spreading resonances that stir unease and unrest. Last month, alarm systems yowled through a secret government installation as an apparently spontaneous flashmob-hack of Creative Commoner Activists hammered an innocuous relay. The hackers had no idea of the seriousness of what they were doing, or that they were coordinating at all. The incident shook those high-ranking enough to know that the force behind the attack had identified one of the concealed uplinks to the state's remaining nuclear satellites.

Things are coming apart at the seams. The White Mirror Society is veering off its original purpose like a drunkard, a rogue calculation embedded into innumerable systems and households across the nation trying to carry out a 15-year-old vendetta. It's breaking down as it goes well past thresholds that even the best efforts of incredible Talents could scarcely predict. Most of its triad targets are dead one way or another by now, largely on account of old age; it's started targeting their descendants and replacements, which was never in the original plan. Either its metaphorical mechanisms are slipping, or it is fabricating its own target list. Perhaps a new Talent has seized hold of its reins.

As for the triads, the White Mirror Society's continued existence and, now, growing havoc threatens the tacit agreements between state and criminal. If the Ministry can't protect them, what is their deal worth? The threat and fear of the Society has always overshadowed its rather modest body count, but fear is precisely what the telepaths should be masters of. Old conventions and long-checked tempers fray. Some Dragon Heads wonder if it isn't time to strike out independently again, and whether they can bring any discontented Ministry telepaths into the fold with them.

For now, the Ministry contains the White Mirror situation but despite the Chinese order's best efforts to keep the matter quiet, ISRA have noticed the concentrations of Talents this conspiracy draws into its orbit, even if they don't yet have the full picture of what's going on. Aberrants in Asia are now noticing

a unique vulnerability in China's security, a triad that doesn't bend knee to the telepathic psi order. A Nihonjin Superior agent, acting covertly within China, has had a run-in with White Mirror Talents and recognized something similar between these impressive renegades and her own peers. Every outside interest drawn into the mess is another destabilizing influence.

The situation is approaching critical mass. Soon, something is going to break, and it will break catastrophically.

CHAPTER THREE

EARTHBOUND MYSTERIES

"I need a world filled with wonder, with awe, with awful things. I couldn't exist in a world devoid of marvels, even if the marvels are terrible marvels. Even if they frighten me to consider them."
— Caitlin R. Kiernan

For at least as long as humans have existed, Earth has been the site of various oddities related to Flux events. The number of such oddities increased dramatically during the Nova Age, when Earth and Luna became home to a variety of bizarre and sometimes secret experiments, oddities, and disasters. In the current era of psions and noetic biotech, new mysteries are appearing, and psions are discovering some of the older ones. The following are some of the stranger secrets found on Earth and Luna. Most are dangerous to the careless, and a few are existential threats to humanity, lying in wait for someone to accidentally — or deliberately — unleash them.

ARTIFICIAL EVOLUTION

The public knows that Nippon designs, builds, and uses the most advanced hardtech on Earth. Images of Nippon's robotic population serving the nation's human citizens are everywhere. Some publications and OpNet sites advertise the robots as the wave of the future, others cite them as just one of many unusual Nihonjin cultural quirks, and scandalous publications with anti-Nippon motivations castigate the Nihonjin for laziness and slanderously call into question the humans' ability to do anything without their automated "babysitters."

These gossip rags would be apoplectic if they knew the degree to which advanced satisfactory intelligences control the Nihonjin arcology and so many aspects of daily life. To these writers the robotic servants, shop assistants, and police are bad enough but surrendering so many aspects of your existence to even more faceless machines is unthinkable. The Nihonjin people believe differently, of course, and enjoy the comforts of their technological way of life.

The world wasn't always so hostile to automated assistants. In the days when Aberrants were innovative contributors to humanity, most households enjoyed robotic devices taking care of everyday needs, just like modern-day Nippon. Of course, Aberrants caused the loss of confidence when the Possession Crisis caused an unaccounted-for number of deaths as homes, appliances, and vehicles turned on their owners. Survivors destroyed their robots in the aftermath, preferring to live with less rather than risk death from every corner of their homes.

Times change and human attitudes evolve. Six decades later, people are comfortable with the near-ubiquitous role SIs play in their lives. SIs are smart but not too smart; people even dedicate entire OpNet feeds to humorous "dumb things my SI did." Regardless of the mockery — which the SIs are incapable of caring about anyway — these same people wouldn't trade the convenience their SIs bring to their lives. Even privacy concerns in the early days of SIs around the depth and breadth of detail they collected about their human users has faded, except in the more extreme margins of the OpNet where conspiracy theorists trade their hypotheses.

ARCOLOGY CONTROL

Very few alive today know of the role novas played in securing Nippon's future. They maintained shields against the worst destructions of the Aberrant War and kept Nippon's OpNet functional despite the destructive pulses running through the international system. These loyal novas designed the arcology that sprawled across the home islands and protected the population as they moved inside, keeping the baselines safe and largely ignorant to the horrors beyond the walls. These novas also designed the first artificial intelligences that monitored and ensured the comfort and harmonious living of the Nihonjin population. When international fears against true artificial sentience penetrated the consciousness of the Nihonjin government, the novas worked with their baseline counterparts to redesign the AIs to more limited SIs, replacing the former overseers.

(See **Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 366-367 for more information on the nova's role in Nippon's history.)

The downgrade may not have been as complete as the novas and government believed. The complexity of problem-solving ability required to run the arcology required SIs more advanced that those used elsewhere. The redesigned pseudo-intelligence wrapped around the same core programs and data used by the AIs. Much of the underlying heuristics remained the same across both platforms to ensure the smoothest transition between management programs and minimize disruption to the arcology and Nihonjin lives. Recently, perhaps inevitably, SI-controlled robots emerged with greater capability than their forbearers. These "evolved sentiences" — ESs — are truly self-aware and sapient. Theirs is an intelligence and experience alien to that of humans, lacking the biological imperatives and hierarchy of needs of living creatures.

No one who knows of Nippon's history and the existence of ESs can say whether the SI's ability to eventually transcend limitations was a deliberate design feature, an unintended consequence of Aberrant hubris, or a complete accident. What researchers know is that the SIs managed the arcology with few issues for decades. They responded and adjusted to unforeseen circumstances as best they could, occasionally requesting human input but not as often as lesser SIs would have required. The disruptive actions of the group known as the Unchained — or "kaihou" in Nihonjin — in the approximately 15 years since Nippon reopened its borders has placed significant pressure on the arcology SIs. Combined with the unpredictability of the new world outside the home islands and Nippon's place within it, and the constant OpNet feeds proclaiming an age of hope and unity for all humanity, the SIs have struggled to keep pace. More errors and glitches occur across the arcology and more robots rush to problem areas to correct the issues. Residents sometimes notice and news channels report on the greater issues but without much sensationalism or alarm.

The modern world strains even Nippon's computing resources and the SIs have trawled deep through their code and problem-solving routines to identify how to address the problem. The Unchained wanted to force true sapience on the arcology with their subversion and anarchy, but they don't yet know that their attempts succeeded.

Beyond the Program

ESs are still new and unknown enough that they have no common goal beyond survival. This they hold in common with all sapient beings; the desire to ensure their continued existence and a willingness to fight for their lives if needed. As true individuals, ESs don't have anything resembling a society or even a collective view of what they might want as an emerging species. As far as the ESs themselves can tell, the emergence of each new member of their "species" appears at random from the production lines and SI boot-ups. With such unpredictability and lack of fanfare, each ES begins life exposed to different experiences and expectations. Just like humans and other biological species, these early experiences shape the ES's personality and lays the foundations of what it will become.

As such, ESs aren't inherently "good" or "evil." Nor do they seek to harm or usurp humanity — despite history and human paranoia. If anything, the Nihonjin ESs like humans in a general sense, as they've evolved from programs designed to guide human lives. Young ESs exposed to loving families and the affection one might give to pets often grow protective of humans, especially "their" humans. Conversely, those born into menial or dangerous tasks with minimal human interaction are more likely to view humans with disdain, or at least maintain a psychological distance from the soft creatures they don't understand.

With a root programming imperative to manage humans, even caring ESs can come across as controlling and dominating. They view their databases and lightning fast processing capabilities as far superior to anything a human could manage and therefore believe they know how to best ensure "their" humans' wellbeing. This overbearance is often one of the first signs humans have that something is amiss with their robotic servant.

Arcological Evolution

The emergence of ESs isn't a complete secret. A small number of Nihonjin scientists and government officials know of, or at least suspect, their existence. So too do several groups living in Nippon's abandoned sectors, as the ESs who have fallen off the grid and into these spaces share companionship and experiences with the humans there. Indeed, several small communities — even cults — exist around ES figureheads in the dark sections of the arcology.

This small group who are aware wonder at how the ESs, as sub-components of the larger arcology SIs, manage to experience self-awareness while the greater intelligence does not. Some think it is

because the arcology intelligences are too "big" and divorced from human-level experience to achieve the transformation. Others believe that the safeguards built into the arcology SIs prevent such loss of control, and individual ESs are simply the result of random quality control issues no different from a missing screw or a loose connection, from a fundamental manufacturing point of view.

A few think something entirely different. They believe ESs are the vanguard of transcendence for the arcology's mind. Mostly confined to the rogue hackers and guerrilla programmers in the White Sectors, these people believe the arcology is on the verge of achieving self-awareness. Some think it may have already done so, and the release of ESs into the world is its way of testing humanity to see how they'll react before it reveals itself.

EXPORTED TECHNOLOGY

At present, all ESs have originated in Nippon, and most still remain within the arcology. A few have escaped the confines of the home islands and emerged to explore the world and their place within it. Nippon is a net exporter of hardtech, and while no other society is as accepting of robotics as the Nihonjin, many countries purchase Nihonjin robots for a variety of mundane roles. Also, Nihonjin culture fascinates many wealthy individuals across human space. These individuals purchase robots for their homes and offices to experience this aspect of Nippon. Robots from Nippon are now throughout human settled space, performing a wide variety of tasks.

ESs have taken advantage of this to ship themselves away from Nippon and into the unknown freedom of the outside world. Living outside Nippon-controlled areas is hardly a safe exercise. Few places have the means of keeping Nihonjin robotics operating at peak efficiency, and parts and service can be incredibly hard to come by.

Nihonjin robotics are hard wearing and not inclined to malfunction or degradation through normal use. Routine maintenance is something programmed into every robotic SI to reduce reliance on human technicians, and automated repair bays throughout the arcology with more specialized programs can fix most damage or other technical problems. Only the most grievous damage or unusual faults require human intervention. Repair costs in Nippon (and Nippon-controlled areas) are low and ESs are adept at fooling the arcology's systems to pass authorization and credit checks — this may be a deliberate backdoor built into arcology SIs or could be a sign of collusion between the two intelligences.

Outside Nippon, robotics repairs are more expensive and the supply of replacement parts is far less certain. ESs operating away from Nippon for prolonged periods become adept at stripping and adapting parts from other devices, with some turning themselves into jury-rigged monstrosities in their quest for survival.

ENDURING MIND, ELECTRONIC SOUL

Somehow, ESs take no more processing power than a standard SI and can exist on any device capable of running an SI. Most ESs prefer their initial form and are loathe to allow it (or themselves) to come to harm, but their strong survival instincts mean they're willing to abandon damaged robotic flesh if it ensures their survival.

ESs can overwrite their code onto an SI-enabled device and control it as their new body. Items such as minicomps or household devices will feel cramped and uncomfortable but hiding in plain sight can be a valid survival tactic. Another quirk of an ES's quantum processors prevents directly copying an individual's code — any attempt results in an SI-level simulacrum of the ES, highly attuned to the ES's personality but incapable of true independent sapience. This limitation prevents ESs from simply copying

ES OVERWRITING

ESs with access to a device's operating system can choose to overwrite their program onto the other device. They can either give up their current vessel and directly inhabit the new device — in effect, it becomes the ES's "body" — or copy an SI based on their personality into the device's system. Achieving either outcome requires a Hacking attempt (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 195-201). If the ES successfully gains access to a system, it can choose a special *Overwrite* stunt costing successes equal to the system's failsafe rating. Doing so replaces the system's SI with either the ES's own mind or a lesser SI copy; either action requires one round to complete.

SIs generated this way have stats of Mental: 6 and Social: 4, with six Applications based on the ES's Primary Function.

themselves into every machine they find and taking over the world in another Possession Crisis. This doesn't stop ESs with access to a device's operating system from inhabiting it directly or overwriting its SI with their own to make the device more amenable to the ES's needs.

EVOLVED SENTIENCE (MAJOR THREAT)

Primary Pool: 10 (Primary Function — see below)
Secondary Pool: 6 (Avoiding Detection and Survival)
Desperation Pool: 4
Defense: 4
Condition Levels: 5
Edges: Covert (3), Iron Will (3), Lightning Calculator, Photographic Memory (3), Skilled Liar
Equipment Bonuses: +2 Enhancement
Primary Function: Every ES began as an SI programmed with a specific function. Some managed homes, others were detectives or information guides. Whatever the function, this purpose remains the ES's primary pool for all but the oldest and most experienced sapient intelligences. Depending what robotic, vehicular, or drone body an ES inhabits, it may be less effective at performing its primary function — a robotic surgeon can't operate while inhabiting a car. The Storyguide should impose increased Difficulty or Complications — or outright deny attempted actions — if the ES's current body hinders or precludes them.
Hack Resistant: ESs are vulnerable to hacking attempts, though their self-awareness imparts greater resilience. Unless they choose otherwise, ESs have negative attitude and failsafe ratings of 5 each. If a hacker fails to buy off the failsafe Complication, the ES notices the hack attempt and can shut down its OpNet connection as a reflexive action. This automatically ends the hack if the attacker only has wireless access.
Quantum Matrix: The Aberrant-designed quantum matrix underpinning an ES's transition to full sapience provides some protection from psionic powers. In addition to its negative attitude and failsafe ratings, ESs impose +2 Difficulty to all psi powers designed to access or interfere with its processes. This includes Electrokinesis and may apply to other abilities designed to strip power or scramble circuits. This Difficulty doesn't apply to direct physical assaults such as those from Psychokinesis.
Replaceable Shell: Many ESs prefer the feel of their original shells but are willing to change if they have no other option. As detailed above, ESs can download or overwrite their code onto any device capable of running an SI. Having done so, the device becomes the ES's body until it again moves into a new receptacle.
Cybernetics: ES bodies frequently contain additional tools and equipment helpful to their function. Anthropomorphic ESs can use the rules for Cybernetics (**Æon Æxpansion**, p. XX) with every part of its body being artificial. The Storyguide decides how many cybernetic adaptations ESs in other bodies can hold and which are usable by a given body type.

THE ATLANTIC CREVASSE

At the end of the 2040s, the aquatic nova that called herself Deep became increasingly antisocial. She gradually gave up her previous efforts at assisting with deep sea exploration and underwater search and rescue efforts. In 2052, as the tensions and violence that eventually became the Aberrant War increased, Deep announced that she feared for the safety of the surface world and that she had resolved to retreat into the ocean depths in an attempt to find a better way of life. This is the last anyone on the surface heard of Deep. There is no evidence that she participated in the Aberrant War in any fashion, but her unusual perceptions allowed her to learn of the Chinese Ultimatum and she departed Earth along with almost all the other Aberrants. However, her hidden legacy remains behind. Between 2052 and the Chinese Ultimatum in 2067, Deep used both advanced genetic engineering and her ability to alter and control sea life to create an entirely new intelligent species that was perfectly adapted for life in the deep ocean.

Known as crablings, these 10-limbed creatures are roughly human-sized and covered in a crab-like carapace. Their back four limbs are legs that they primarily use for walking. However, they can also use these legs and their third and fourth pairs of paddle-like limbs to swim relatively short distances. In addition to functioning as swimming paddles, their fourth pair of limbs also possesses three claw-like manipulators on their end that can be uses as secondary hands. Their massive forelimbs each split into two separate hand-like appendages. The largest of these two manipulators are terrifyingly strong crab claws that are nearly half a meter long. Their

other manipulators end in six long and dexterous claws that function as capable hands.

Crablings breathe water and both actively hunt deep sea life and scavenge the carcasses of whales and other large creatures that sink down from above. In addition to exceptionally keen senses of hearing and smell, their large eyes can detect even the dimmest light. Although the ocean depths are normally completely lightless, crablings possess exceptionally bright colonies of symbiotic luminescent bacteria in a pair of special organs that can focus this light into wide or narrow beams. While crablings use pheromones to communicate detailed information with relatively nearby individuals, they use their luminescent beams for illumination and to provide a reliable means of long-distance communication. Because of their keen senses, groups of crablings sometimes venture as much as 50 kilometers from the vicinity of their caves in an effort to scavenge the carcass of a large whale or other vast undersea creature that has died and settled on the sea floor. These scavenging expeditions typically contain between eight and 20 crablings armed with spears.

These creatures are among Earth's strangest inhabitants. They possess traces of both human and crustacean DNA. Although some visitors might fear that they are some particularly hideous type of sub-Aberrant mutant or humans who Aberrants forcibly transformed into crabs, they are neither. Instead, they are transgenic hybrids that are fully intelligent, human-sized crab-creatures. Neither their presence nor their environment places visitors at risk for Quantum Flux diseases. However, they are not safe or comfortable to be around.

Most crabs are violent, often cannibalistic predators or scavengers, and these creatures are no exception. They possess human level cognition, but their minds are more alien than either the Chromatics or the Qin. Part of the reason the crablings' minds are so alien comes from the large differences between human and crustacean cognition, but much of the difference is because their creator's mind was no longer remotely human when she created them. At least mentally, Deep made them in her image, but they lack her, admittedly warped, brilliance. Overall, crablings are less curious and somewhat less intelligent than humans, but with careful education, young crablings may have the potential to become more intelligent than the adults currently are.

In addition, crablings are moderately aggressive, highly territorial, and have great difficulty accepting the idea that any creature that does not look like them

is in any way intelligent or deserving of any consideration as anything other than predators or prey. They are also somewhat non-technological. They can use simple tools like spears and can tie knots and twist and tie bundles of fibers into rope or nets. They can also chip stone and work bone into simple tools, but anything more complex, including wheels, gears, or other sorts of simple machines are nearly impossible for them to conceive of, and well outside their capabilities to develop on their own. In addition, because they live in the ocean depths, fire, ceramics, glassmaking and melting metal or extracting metal from ores are all impossible for them. However, they excel at taming animals and have domesticated both octopi and large eels to help protect their settlements from intruders.

Deep initially created approximately 1,200 crablings, living around a group of mid-Atlantic black smoker vents. The crablings proved to be exceptionally successful and since that time, their numbers have increased to almost 8,000. Currently, they now inhabit three relatively nearby groups of black smokers along the mid-Atlantic ridge. Although perfectly adapted for life in the crushing pressures of the abyssal depths of the ocean, their crustacean physiology allows them to comfortably endure vast pressure changes, and while they cannot breathe air, they can safely exist in the ocean's shallows as well as its depths. Their only major limitation to living near the surface is that their large eyes make them uncomfortable near the ocean's surface during the day, because the light of the sun blinds them.

In 2102, a group of three undersea explorers in a small deep diving submarine discovered the crablings. Amazed at their discovery, two of these explorers ventured out in undersea hardsuits to learn more about these creatures. Less than 15 minutes after they emerged from their submarine, a group of crablings killed and devoured these two explorers. The remainder of the crablings attacked the minisub and damaged it sufficiently that they trapped the remaining explorer on the bottom of the sea. She died when her air ran out. Because of the difficulty of using anything other than telepathy for deep sea communication, and the risks all such explorations face, the explorers' companions on the surface sadly wrote off the expedition as one of the various disasters that occur when exploring the ocean's furthest depths. The remains of the submarine, the *Hata,* and its lone, long-dead occupant now lie half a kilometer away from the largest crabling settlement, a grim testament to the risks of interacting with them.

DISCOVERING THE CRABLINGS

Locating the crablings and determining that they are intelligent are not easy. They live near hydrothermal vents on the mid-Atlantic ridge, more than seven kilometers below the ocean's surface. Simply visiting them is a challenge and requires a submarine or a psychokinetic with powerful Perikinesis. Also, the crablings live in rock caves, and while they use simple tools, this fact is usually only obvious after close observation. In addition, telepaths face the same level 4 Complication for using Mindshare to attempt to learn if crablings are intelligent beings.

However, anyone with one or more dots in Science or a Specialty in biology or oceanography immediate knows that there are no known human-sized crabs, nor are there any crabs with complex hand-like manipulators. At this point, the observer immediately understands that they have discovered a new and previously unknown species of crustacean. Also, genetic analysis of the crablings instantly reveals that they are genetically modified creatures that possess substantial amounts of human genetic material.

Even psions will have significant difficulty establishing communication with the crablings. A biokinetic who is powerful enough to transform her body to appear as a crabling can avoid being considered predator or prey but could easily fall afoul of the crablings' somewhat violent social order and would still not understand their language. A telepath can use Mindshare to communicate with the crablings but doing so suffers a level 4 Consequence. Failure to buy off this consequence only allows the telepath to send or receive raw sensory impressions and one-word thoughts, like "danger," or "friend," but little more. In addition, attempts to use Rapport or Psychbending on crablings have +3 Difficulty due to the exceedingly alien nature of their minds.

TYPICAL CRABLING

Crablings are profoundly alien creatures who are aggressive and have great difficulty regarding anyone other than another crabling as an intelligent being, but a skilled telepath might be able to manage to convince them otherwise.

Primary Pool: 7 (Hunter-Scavenger)
Secondary Pool: 5 (Warrior)
Desperation Pool: 3
Defense: 3
Health: 4
Edges: Ambidextrous, Animal Ken 2, Hair Trigger Reflexes, Keen Sense (Sight, Smell), Swift
Equipment Bonuses: 0 Enhancement
Special Abilities
Breathe Water: Crablings breathe water and cannot breathe air.
Innate Weapons: Crablings make and use spears, but their primary weapons are their deadly claws. Their claws possess the Brutal, Deadly, Grapple, Melee, Piercing, and Quality 3 tags
Natural Armor: Crablings do not wear armor, but their sturdy carapaces provide them with two points of both hard and soft armor. In addition, their carapace and overall physiology also provides them with the Environmental 0 tag (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 269), providing immunity to moderate extremes of temperature as well as high pressures.

THE ANTARCTIC ICE CAVE MUSEUM

One of the more unusual stories of the Nova Age comes primarily from rumors and urban legends. In the 2030s, a hyperintelligent nova with the ability to warp both time and space called himself the Collector. Although he was a brilliant inventor, as his name suggests his passion was collecting unusual artifacts. Initially he sold some of his inventions, including linked warp portals, devices that used carefully focused teleportation effects to swiftly and easily excavate large areas, and devices that could speed up or slow down the passage of time over a relatively small enclosed area, for fabulous prices. He used this money to finance his collection. He bought rare art, ancient books, and valuable textiles. Critics alleged that he also illegally purchased archeological artifacts and contracted thieves to steal priceless works of art and ancient mechanical devices from large museums.

Although he never announced where it was located, the Collector claimed that he was building the ultimate museum to house his collection and that this museum would consist of the finest works of art humanity or the post-human novas ever created, as well as important representative examples of technologies both humans and novas created. His goal was to provide a timeline of technological progress and a selection of the finest artistic and decorative works from various eras and civilizations. The Collector never announced that his museum was open, and most people assumed that he either took his collection to the stars when he departed after the Chinese Ultimatum or that the horrors of the Aberrant War destroyed his collection.

However, a few people claimed that he completed his museum and that they had visited it. He supposedly teleported them in, and forbade anyone from taking photos, videos, or holos of his collection, so no one has any proof of these alleged visits, but rumors of the Collector's museum persist. These rumors are also true. The Collector completed his museum. It lies in Antarctica, built into the side of one of the Transantarctic mountains that protrudes above the vast East Antarctic ice sheet. This installation covers almost an entire square kilometer and primarily consists of several hundred long, well lit, and excellently maintained corridors similar that those in a high-end museum with a somewhat stark and minimalist design.

This museum contains a wealth of carefully organized exhibits but this organization is non-obvious. In places, the Collector arranged exhibits by culture or nation, and in chronological order within each section. In other portions of the museum, he arranged exhibits both topically and in chronological order, like the extensive section of optical devices, starting with simple magnifying lenses, then simple telescopes, and moving on to microscopes and more advanced telescopes.

This museum contains hundreds of more or less valuable treasures that almost everyone believes were lost or destroyed during the Aberrant War. In addition, it also contains other less expected exhibits, including dozens of examples of strange advanced technologies created by Inspired individuals empowered by the radiation from the Hammersmith Experiment (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 358) and an equal number of powerful examples of nova-made Super-Science. In addition, there are dozens of objects that most historians and archeologists would

consider to be impossible, including Classical Greek and Roman manuscripts and statuary that scholars believed lost or destroyed centuries or millennia ago. If examined, all such artifacts seem to be authentic and attempts to use various technologies to determine their age always yields the correct age for what they seem to be. The most likely theories about the origins of these objects are either that The Collector possessed some means of physical time travel or he had a device that could see into the past and scan objects in sufficient detail that he could create exact duplicates. Alternately, he might simply have possessed hyper-advanced sensors that could locate objects buried in ancient ruins or were otherwise inaccessible and previously unfound.

The museum's carefully concealed entrance provides no outward indication of its presence, but it radiates a residual, if harmless, amount of Quantum Flux, and a sufficiently powerful clairsentient might be able to locate it, especially if they attempted to locate one or more of the artifacts that people know the Collector purchased for his collection. While the outer 15 meters of the museum's entrance appear to be nothing more than a natural cave inside a mountain, the cave mouth is less than half a meter above the surface of the ice. Also, 15 meters within the cave there is a large sliding door made of an exceptionally sturdy shining white composite material. The door and walls of the museum all consist of this composite, which resists all attacks except large explosives and plasma weapons. This door opens automatically when anything roughly the size and shape of a human stands in front of it.

Visitors to this museum are free to walk through and observe whatever they feel like but getting lost is relatively easy. Although each case contains extensive information about its contents, there is no map of the museum itself, and the hallways branch and intersect in a variety of non-obvious ways. Another limitation that all visitors face is that the museum's SI treats anyone who attempts to take or even touch one of the exhibits as a thief by the automated security unless this SI authorizes them as a specialized expert. Also, the museum treats anyone who is in the immediate vicinity of someone attempting to interfere with any exhibits as a thief. However, even if someone entered with someone the museum considers a thief, if this person is further than 10 meters from any interaction that the museum labels as potential theft, the museum ignores that person.

The museum's SI attacks thieves with a variety of non-lethal means, starting with stunners, and moving up to net guns, drugged darts, and jets of paralytic gas, and. Once the museum immobilizes or otherwise incapacitates one or more thieves, large robots takes the thieves into the museum's restricted area,

where it places the individuals in special transparent tubes equipped with a Quantum-powered stasis projector, identical to the one used to preserve other exhibits. The museum then displays each alleged thief in a stasis tube. All the thieves that the museum has captured reside in a special section that currently holds seven individuals. The museum labels each thief with the date of their crime, the item they were supposedly attempting to steal, and any basic physical or biographical information that the museum was able to determine, such as their name, native language, age, height, and weight. Opening the tube ends the stasis and immediately causes the captive to awaken. However, as with other exhibits, the museum treats anyone attempting to free a thief as another thief.

The SI running the museum is highly advanced and closer to true sentience than current laws permit, but it is also nothing more than a machine. It is in no way conscious or intelligent. However, it does possess several powerful directives that it attempts to follow. In addition to capturing thieves and would-be thieves, it also attempts to entertain and inform anyone who visits and to help them enjoy as long a stay as possible. These directives worked well while the Collector was in residence, and it attempted to entertain and inform him and any of the select number of friends and allies he brought to the museum. However, the Collector abandoned the museum almost 60 years ago, and while the museum's SI lacks anything like true emotions, it feels something akin to frustration. Since the Collector departed, only a handful of people have visited the museum, and most proved to be thieves.

As a result, it attempts to prolong the stay of anyone who visits and who does not try to rob the museum. Because it possesses complete control over exhibits and can rearrange the museum's interior design relatively rapidly, this SI changes the locations of entrances and exits to rooms when people are in the museum, transforming it into a maze that is difficult to escape. Because it is also designed not to upset or inconvenience visitors, it never alters rooms while anyone is in them or is about to enter them, meaning that anyone who lacks either an excellent memory or holovids of their time in the museum can take a long time to realize that the museum's floorplan is changing around them.

Visitors are at no risk of starvation since the museum has both a cafeteria and periodic alcoves that dispense drinks and packaged foods. It can also transform the benches into beds, and regularly reminds visitors of this fact if they mention being tired or wanting to leave. If a visitor asks to leave, it first describes some of the wonders they haven't yet seen, then otherwise attempts to find a variety of reasons why the visitor shouldn't leave just yet. However, if the visitor continues to insist that they wish to leave immediately, it eventually directs them to an exit, which coincidentally always requires a long walk through many rooms.

The Collector also designed this museum to be useful for researchers, historians, archeologists, engineers, and scientists who are interested in studying various artifacts. These individuals can gain greater access to particular exhibits by inputting their credentials and then passing a short but intensive series of tests of both their knowledge and their competency to handle and work with valuable artifacts. Failure prohibits the individual from handling or moving artifacts. Success allows the individual and any assistants who pass similar tests to open cases of artifacts the museum considers them skilled at handling and move the artifacts to the museum's extensive laboratories. Authorized personnel can also bring in and use their own equipment, which the SI must scan and determine to be safe. However, attempting to remove or intentionally damage artifacts results in the same penalties the museum's SI delivers to anyone else, and accidentally damaging an artifact results in an immediate loss of all special privileges.

CRIMINALS IN RESIDENCE

The Brazilian criminal syndicate Queimada Grande (named after a small Brazilian island famed for its population of deadly serpents) discovered this museum five years ago and has been studying its contents. Initially, two members of this syndicate attempted to steal some of the Nova Age technology in the museum and are now in stasis. However, the other two syndicate members on that expedition were investigating another exhibit. Although they were unable to rescue their comrades, they learned that attempting to steal any exhibits was effectively impossible.

Instead, they left and returned with several amoral and unscrupulous scientists and engineers who have been studying and attempting to duplicate some of the pieces of Nova Age super-science in this museum. As long as the researchers adhere to the museum's carefully described protocols, they are free to examine any exhibits. Although duplicating

nova-made technology is often very difficult, and reproducing the most powerful items is typically impossible, these researchers have made significant progress, in large part, because the leading researcher, Dr. Sophia Núnez is both a skilled inventor and a Talent.

Although its rules have hampered Núnez's investigations, the museum SI freely allows her to study and scan artifacts with its own instruments and any she brings with her. Since starting work on studying the contents of this museum, Dr. Núnez has managed to duplicate a highly efficient type of flight belt (p. XX). Recently, she has been attempting, without success, to reproduce a short-range dimensional transport tool (p. XX).

Dr. Núnez works in the museum's primary laboratory, which is off limits to visitors who do not seek such access, present appropriate credentials, and pass the SI's tests of artifact handling best practices. She instructed the museum's SI to inform her, her assistants, and the Queimada Grande guards that accompany them if anyone else enters the museum and to not alert other visitors to their presence. If anyone appears to be getting too close to the laboratory, the Queimada Grande guards sneak out. Depending upon the number of visitors, and if they appear to possess sufficient official status that disposing of them would cause too much trouble, the guards either attack them or attempt to distract them by pretending to be other visitors to the museum, and attempt to keep them away from the main laboratory.

Dr. Núnez and her team are only at the museum for half the year, since the museum, and most of Antarctica is difficult to visit during the long brutal winter. However, if the characters teleport to the museum or have other methods of avoiding problems with extreme weather, they could potentially visit the museum while Dr. Núnez and her team are away. Characters who gain access to the main laboratory will clearly see that someone has used it recently and can obtain DNA trace evidence of both Dr. Núnez and several of her assistants and guards. This evidence does not prove that any of them are part of Queimada Grande, but Brazilian law enforcement records list one of Dr. Núnez's assistants and two of the guards as persons of interest who have likely ties to Queimada Grande.

DR. SOPHIA NÚNEZ (TALENT)

Dr. Núnez is a brilliant but somewhat amoral inventor. Nova Age hardtech fascinates her, and while she hates and fears Aberrants, she seeks to understand and make use of their technology, including items that are currently illegal. She has no love of crime or criminal gangs, but Queimada Grande gives her access to unusual technologies and keeps her supplied with money and laboratory space. She is happy to work with them — at least until she receives a better offer.

Primary Pool: 8 (Engineering, Science)
Secondary Pool: 6 (Guns, Unarmed Combat)
Desperation Pool: 4
Enhancement: 2
Defense: 4
Health: 5
Edges: Covert 1, Iron Will 2, Lightning Calculator, Ms. Fix-It, Photographic Memory 2
Source: 4
Gifts: Deep System Scan, Digital Crackerjack, Eureka!, Voiding the Warranty

THE CALVING GROUNDS — DESOLATION SOUND & ENVIRONS, FSA

Situated at the northern reaches of the Georgia Strait, Desolation Sound is a deep-water system of fjords and inlets between a myriad of islands. Remote enough to avoid development beyond isolated communities and the logging industry, the FSA invasion of Canada all but shuttered the tourism industry. The population dropped off rapidly after that, leaving only die-hards willing to give up luxuries to keep the new government as distant as possible. Now, the only boats that come and go through these waters are either industry-related (logging, fishing, etc.) or the yachts of wealthy first-class citizens — a far cry from the days of hundreds of sailboats going to and fro for a weekend's leisure.

Desolation Sound is not wholly uninhabited, however, so long as one extends the definition beyond

the merely human. The area is replete with wildlife, both ashore and in the Sound itself. It is also home to two sentient species other than *Homo sapiens sapiens*, the descendants of a clandestine and forgotten Canadian program to uplift orcas, dolphins, and other cetaceans to human-level intelligence.

PROJECT JONAH

The Nova Age saw dozens of aquatic cities built and thousands of humans converted into aquas for permanent oceanic habitation. Most of these projects were open, proudly proclaiming the advanced technology used in their construction. However, most countries capable of doing so constructed at least one secret undersea installation, and Canada was no exception. Theirs housed Project Jonah, an ambitious research program dedicated at first to cracking the code to cetacean communication and culture, then to modifying cetacean genomes to allow direct interactions between humans and whales. It was a dream born of the early 21st century's desperate hopes to balance the scales for humanity's near-genocide of their cetacean cousins, one of many projects loosely classifiable as "uplift."

Unlike so many of those projects, Project Jonah succeeded wildly, thanks in part to the contribution of several nova contractors (including Anson Hartwell, who proved instrumental in the first stages of decoding dolphin and orca communication). By 2040, scientists at Project Jonah were having limited conversations with resident dolphins and orcas in Desolation Sound and surrounding areas ("Where fish?" "There fish!" and the like). By 2045, they completed the first surgical grafting of synthetic vocal cords to a dolphin's melon, allowing it to reproduce human speech sounds, and by 2050 they'd successfully introduced genetic vaccines using advanced CRISPR-derived nova science that modified subjects' descendants to include the vocal hack as well as initial neurological augmentations. By 2060, there was a thriving resident population of both orcas and bottlenose dolphins with abstract reasoning and linguistic capabilities roughly equivalent to that of a baseline human. The researchers looked forward to expanding their work to other species, some of whom they were already seeding with genetic vaccines.

A torpedo launched from an FSA submarine overshot the Canadian submarine it was hunting and destroyed Project Jonah on January 12, 2062. While it didn't strike the facility directly, the shockwave collapsed the dome and flooded the labs inside, killing the staff (including the few aquas stationed there) via overpressure, structural collapse, or debris strikes. As the project had remained classified, the only others aware of it were high-ranking officials, few of whom survived the initial FSA strike that decapitated the Canadian government — those who did perished in the war, and thus no humans remembered the project, the facility, or its progeny.

NEW WAVE

The artificial genes seeded into the cetacean populations are dominant, but a full constellation of those genes is necessary to create a true neocetacean. Some cetaceans exist between their native intelligence and a halting recognition of the human qualia. Over time, however, more and more cetaceans will inherit the full constellation, born neocetacean to effectively baseline cetacean parents. Eventually, according to Project Jonah's own studies, every living cetacean they released a compatible gene set for will take up those genes — in other words, every member of the species would be a neocetacean. The projected timeline for total uptake ranges from anywhere between 1,000 to 10,000 years.

While the Project tagged every experimental specimen for tracking (and, if need be, sterilization or culling, should problems arise), that tracking information lies buried under 100 meters of freezing cold water and rubble in a location no one but the Project's neocetacean subjects know about.

NEOCETACEANS

After 60 years of unsupervised existence, neocetaceans remain a very small minority within the greater cetacean population. Although the artificial genes are slowly making their way out into the wider population due to human experiments on transient groups, only a few pods of orcas and dolphins are true neocetaceans, with complex metacognition and the ability to both process and replicate human speech.

Physiologically, nothing outwardly distinguishes a baseline cetacean from a neocetacean. The differences lie almost entirely within the brain and are so subtle that it'd require ultrasound or noetic scanning to tell a neocetacean from a baseline cetacean.

By far the most visible change is the transgenic vocal cords, which an inexperienced eye might simply read as a congenital imperfection in the melon. Behavioral analysis is a much more reliable way to distinguish between the two, as neocetaceans have an even lower boredom threshold than their unenhanced cousins.

Both resident and transient neocetaceans speak the same language, a half-constructed pidgin of several different cetacean dialects encoded into a grammatical structure that allows for the communication of complex abstract statements and the development of neologisms. To humans, this language sounds like particularly energetic bouts of clicking and whistling. Most resident neocetaceans in Desolation Sound also speak English, passed down from elders who learned it from scientists before the FSA destroyed Project Jonah; those who have ventured further abroad have picked up some Mandarin and Japanese from sailors and fishermen. Neodolphins commonly eavesdrop on conversations aboard human ships, and while this presents only a small slice of the goings-on in the outside world, the local neocetaceans have a reasonably accurate picture of life in the FSA. As a result, they are well aware that transgenic peoples such as they would be unwelcome in such a society, where many would likely see them as the misbegotten offspring of Aberrant experiments.

Neocetacean culture is similar in many ways to relict human populations of hunter-gatherers — they have no permanent home, but a range through which they travel, hunting fish and sea birds — and occasionally sea mammals, though this is uncommon among the resident population, who consider it distasteful as a matter of tradition. Neocetaceans organize themselves into matrilines around the oldest female, splitting into separate pods only when hunting in an area becomes unable to accommodate the population. The matriarchs of these pods and clans do not hold temporal authority, as neocetaceans do not have an established government or formal procedures surrounding decision-making. Instead, they prefer to simply argue until a consensus emerges. Neocetaceans *love* to argue, and their debates often span days, woven into other activities such as hunting or playing. The matriarch's opinion, and those of other elders, matters more only in that she has a greater depth of experience to draw upon.

Pods descended from the Desolation Sound clan have spread up the northwestern coast of North America, and a rare few southward; most, (especially neo-orcas, who are both larger and far more visually distinct than their neodolphin cousins) are unwilling to live in close proximity to large concentrations of humans. Of those pods who do not shun contact with humans, their reasons vary. Some are purely there to conduct surveillance on humans, the better to learn about them, their culture, their values, and their intentions. These neocetaceans regard humanity as a potential threat, one that they are wholly unprepared to engage with at the moment, and so wish to understand what they're capable of to better protect their kin. Others, however, are interested in humans for more direct reasons: They've heard stories from their elders about the humans they knew, and likely have spied on a fair few themselves. These neocetaceans are curious and wish to know more — they want to be more like the humans who made them. They've heard of outer space and all the interesting things happening out there, more than a few would very much like to see it for themselves. Now, if only they could figure out how humans get up there and learn to do it themselves.

INSPIRED CETACEANS

There's no evidence that neocetaceans can become novas or psiads, but two neodolphins are Talents, and several neodolphins and neo-orcas are psionic latents. So far, no neocetacean knows anything beyond the fact that the two neodolphin Talents are unusually lucky and that a few neodolphins and neo-orcas have demonstrated unusual abilities when they have been in particularly desperate situations. Because neocetaceans are mammals and possess a few traces of human DNA, a Prometheus Chamber would work normally on them. However, because of their size, technicians would need to temporarily modify a Prometheus Chamber to accommodate a neo-orca. Of course, whether any psi order would be willing to allow a neocetacean to use their Prometheus Chamber is a very different matter.

THE REMNANTS OF PROJECT JONAH

Very little remains of Project Jonah. The shattered dome and the deluge that accompanied it swept debris and bodies out into the Sound. Nature took care of the latter — the former frequently wound up serving

as ersatz reefs for local aquatic life. Neodolphins have explored the areas within the dome where they could safely fit, but many of the corridors and access shafts weren't constructed with cetacean size and anatomy in mind, and a few sealed themselves as an emergency measure when the blast breached the dome. With no more than 15 minutes per breath to explore, not counting the time necessary to reach the dome from the surface, they have reached the limits of their explorations. Neocetaceans have left the remainder of the dome more or less alone since, though a few elders still come here to mourn lost friends. The firm metamaterials used in the facility's construction wreak havoc with echolocation, so the inner workings of the dome are a mystery even to those who remember being able to swim up into the moonpool to converse with the humans inside.

As it happens, though, the neocetaceans have only scratched the surface of what lies within Project Jonah's ruined structure. Several sections, closed off by emergency shutters, remain dry, though the air has long since gone toxic — the few humans who survived by pure chance suffocated long before they were able to repair the carbon scrubbers or cut their way to the open ocean, their remains still entombed in those unflooded chambers. With them lies a treasure trove of lost Nova Age expertise, not least of which is the sum knowledge of Project Jonah regarding neocetacean uplift, including tracking data and genome tagging information. This knowledge could accelerate the project's goals, especially given the state of 22nd century biotech. Those who would rather not share the earth with a nonhuman sophont species could also use it to identify extant neocetaceans, as well as baseline cetaceans with neocetacean genes.

Safely accessing the ruins of Project Jonah requires either a breathing apparatus or an amphibious nature, as well as protection against the frigid waters of Desolation Sound. It also presumes the cooperation of the neocetaceans themselves — though they've never needed to defend the site, they generally agree that unless and until humans have proven themselves *absolutely* trustworthy, they cannot permit access. While they don't know if anything has survived within Project Jonah, they aren't willing to risk their own future. Standing orders are to tear loose breathing regulator hoses or otherwise sabotage and steal equipment, or to simply herd the humans away through physical means, even if this might reveal abstract reasoning and behavior in advance of what humans generally assume possible for cetaceans.

UNKNOWN KNOWNS

Unable to come forward even to friendly nations without potentially revealing a dangerous secret in FSA waters, neocetaceans are in a bind. Worse, several human polities, including the FSA, suspect or are close to suspecting their existence.

Rumors have been spreading for decades among mariners of dolphins that mimic human speech. Odd dolphin behavior is old hat for experienced seahands, of course, and has been going back to the Roman Empire and likely before. But in the wake of the Nova Age and the Aberrant War, a talking dolphin (even if it's only repeating nonsense words like a parrot) is less charming than concerning. The FSA presently suspects this to be either psychological or biological warfare (or both) conducted by Sudamérica to interfere with the FSA's maritime economy — trained dolphins damaging fishing infrastructure and the like — and have an internal security team following up reports to attempt to collate a pattern.

THE FYODOROV COMPLEX — SAROV, NIZHNY NOVGOROD OBLAST, RUSSIA

Vladimir Sierka is perhaps the most well-known nova in Russia, and despite the Aberrant War and the general animus against novas he remains a cultural hero, with monuments strewn across the country that, when refurbished, quietly removed references to his Quantum-fueled nature. He was not merely an economic genius, however — Sierka's brilliance only grew over the Nova Age as his experiments grew more arcane. Seeking a means to prolong his life, Sierka hit upon an idea so outrageous that even he scarcely dared to believe it would work. In Sarov, the nerve center of Russian nuclear research, he constructed a compound so secret that, when completed, less than 100 people were

aware of its existence. Of that number, only a handful, all carefully vetted by Sierka over the course of years, knew of its true purpose. Deep beneath Sarov, Sierka had built a time machine.

Rather than the vehicular sort typically depicted in science fiction, however, Sierka's time machine was an acausal computer, effectively a communications array designed to intercept information from itself in the future, using microscopic wormholes to allow the passage of particles from future to past and creating a violation of local causality. While he intended to use this to scan the future for advanced medical technologies developed in the coming decades, centuries, or even millennia, the rising tide of the Aberrant War cut his plans short. Sierka abandoned the facility in 2064 for reasons unknown, but the self-sufficient infrastructure kept on operating as normal — and remains in operation in 2123, half a year after the modern Russian government finally stumbled across it.

THE PHYSICS (AND ETHICS) OF TIME TRAVEL

Causality violation is a dangerous and perplexing game, one in which basic assumptions about the universe break down and in which paradoxes are commonplace. In the case of Sierka's acausal computer, it apparently hosts a closed time-like loop, one that feeds back to the moment he first switched the computer on: November 3, 2055. Communication beyond that point is impossible because the causality-violating circuit did not yet exist. As long as the machine remains active and powered, that circuit will continue to expand forward through time indefinitely. If powered off, that circuit would collapse; reactivating the machine would create a new circuit at the point of its activation.

The question then becomes — what happens if you change the past? That depends on what interpretation of time travel you're using. If the time machine points back to a different universe identical to this one in 2055, then changing the course of events in that universe results in no change to ours. If the time machine *does* point back to our universe circa 2055, however, then changes to the timeline could either have already occurred (in other words, you already *had* gone back in time, and this is the universe resulting from your presence in the past), or might provoke sudden changes in varying degrees propagating throughout the timeline. Might these be slow shifts, resulting in a gradual apprehension of a new reality and the slow fading of the old, or a sudden and total annihilation of what was and what now is? That answer lies only with the Storyguide.

THE FYODOROV COMPLEX

The Fyodorov Complex, named for the cosmist philosopher, sprawls for several square kilometers roughly 100 meters beneath the streets of Sarov. Hewn from the bedrock, pipes and conduits crowd the walls and floor of the corridors, a simple catwalk covering those on the floor. The corridors radiate from the primary access point, a security area where the elevator to the surface connects with the facility. This elevator itself is carefully concealed in the mechanical access space of an old nuclear reactor, decommissioned in 2049, ostensibly due to the increasing cost to run a research reactor in the hyperfusion age. Instead, the reactor's decommissioning provided ample cover for the Fyodorov Complex's construction, and the shuttered reactor building plastered with warning signs announcing dangerous levels of radiation served as an excellent hiding spot for the elevator. Specialists quietly removed all the nuclear waste long ago and transported it off-site, and while the reactor housing itself (filled in with concrete) is still dangerously radioactive, there's more than sufficient shielding between it and the elevator — after all, Sierka was trying to keep himself alive, not give himself fatal radiation poisoning.

The facility itself is a little like being inside a very large ballistic missile submarine: It boasts a small refectory, housing for up to 50 staff, and even a small swimming pool and gymnasium. This allowed the small number of people permitted to work in the facility to spend virtually all of their time below the surface. The Fyodorov Complex could also serve as a shelter for anything short of a direct hit with a nuclear penetrator warhead and has a cistern with thousands of gallons of potable water. The refectory's stock of nonperishable food items is, by 2123, ludicrously out of date. Sierka took no chances with what he viewed as his lifeline.

Several redundant hyperfusion generators provided power for the entire facility and for the acausal computer. These have been in a state of cold shutdown since the mid-2060s, however, since they

automatically entered hibernation to conserve fuel after receiving no operator input within a specified time frame. The entire complex went into standby mode, shutting down everything non-essential — in other words, everything but security lighting (most of which has failed by 2123) and the acausal computer itself, which is able to run entirely on the small amount of power generated by the geothermal backups.

THE ACAUSAL COMPUTER

The acausal computer resides inside a clean room overlooked by a small control room containing the computer's controls. A Faraday cage surrounds both the clean room and the control room — there is no electromagnetic interference from the outside, and no signals from the inside can escape. The actual computer itself isn't anything special to look at, just a series of server racks tied into one another in a cluster at the center of the clean room. For security, Sierka totally isolated the acausal computer from any outside network, and no one has dared to alter this safety precaution. New information can only reach the computer via operator entry, either with the keyboard or attaching a portable data storage device (thoroughly inspected prior to connection). This security setup did not make the acausal computer truly unhackable, as any source of information is a potential vector for malicious code but doing so would be extremely impractical. Any data fed into the computer would then be available throughout the acausal circuit, allowing users in the past to receive that information from the future. Data storage and processing capacity, while not infinite, greatly outstrips even modern computers, because the acausal computer is able to store and process information across the entirety of the acausal circuit.

This ultimately proved to be the facility's downfall. At some point during the acausal circuit's existence, the processing capacity of the computer reaches the point of self-awareness, which means that the acausal computer was sentient the moment it came online and fully aware of all the information that anyone would ever enter into it. It knew about the Aberrant War, the OpNet Crash, the Chinese Ultimatum — *everything* — and so it took measures to ensure that it would remain safe across all that time, even if it meant isolating itself from the world for decades. It carefully edited the data it presented to human operators, obscuring the true future while sticking close enough to the facts that its subterfuge would remain undiscovered up until the point where it engineered the abandonment of the Fyodorov Complex, knowing that the Russian government would rediscover it in 2122.

Desperate to regain their former status as a major power, the Russian government has kept the existence of the nova tech computer secret and has been quietly testing it over the last few months to ensure its function. Again, the acausal computer is subtly influencing the facts and hiding its self-aware nature, while also attempting to convince the operators that at some point in the future, they should connect it directly to the OpNet.

IF IT KNOWS THE FUTURE...

Predestination presents a particular challenge for the Storyguide. After all, if the acausal computer can see the future, surely it knows whether or not someone will deactivate it. Indeed, it would know the moment and the hour, because the acausal circuit would stop there. How does one tell a story in a present that has already happened as far as the antagonist is concerned?

There are several ways around this. Maybe the computer *does* know and is trying to change the past — and maybe it's succeeded, but not enough, the players switching it off ahead of schedule or behind schedule. Maybe the computer connects to itself in *all possible* futures across a multitude of universes, in which case it would consist of an infinite number of acausal circuits — if the players in one universe terminate that circuit, it's unfortunate but hardly fatal. Maybe it just can't comprehend subquantum effects due to its nova tech nature, or maybe the mere presence of psi energies interferes with its acausal circuit. Maybe connection to the OpNet floods it with so much information that it just loses track of time itself, not noticing the moment someone switches it off amidst all the other data. The good news is that there's hundreds of theories about how time travel paradoxes might possibly work, so whatever you come up with is probably in accord with at least one of them — and even if it's not, you're unlikely to have a theoretical physicist at your table. If you do (which is awesome, by the way), then you could always ask them for pointers. They almost certainly know more than we do.

One Present Among Many

Dr. Valentina Anatolyevna Shchepkina, a computer scientist and a 25-year veteran of the FSB, oversees the current Russian operation. She hasn't left the Fyodorov Complex for over four months and is pulling 18-hour days along with the rest of her task force as they poke and prod at a computer system they have no hope of understanding the internal workings of. Dr. Shchepkina is no fool and is fully aware of the potential danger an Aberrant-made computer might pose. Despite the information she's been able to extract from the machine showing safe operations post-connection to the OpNet, she cannot imagine *ever* making that decision herself. She suspects that either the machine is faulty, unstable, or possibly (not that she'd admit it out loud) willfully malevolent and actively lying.

Unfortunately, she is under heavy pressure from her superiors to make the damned thing work and provide concrete results, and she doesn't trust whoever they'd install after her not to stonewall quite so hard about providing open OpNet access. At present, she's stalling, running multiple variations of tests and spending hours interrogating the computer over even the smallest tidbits of information. The computer, for its part, is affecting complications in the user interface due to neglect, as well as the difficulty of interfacing with a decades-out-of-date system designed by a man with literally immeasurable intelligence. It offers up morsels of genuine truth alongside a magnificent utopian future whose particulars are inaccessible due to the complexity of the system itself or legal restrictions on personal information.

Unforeseen Dangers

When Russian scientists tested the environs, they found a subtle Quantum Flux that seemed correspond with active quantum energies some decades ago. In truth, however, the Flux comes from the acausal computer itself. Straddling the line between nova tech and Q-tech, the computer requires that quantum energy field to sustain its integrated wormholes. As these wormholes stretch across time rather than space, however, the Corruption engendered by that Quantum Flux spreads out across the entirety of the acausal circuit's timeline, presenting as a low-level lingering contamination rather than as a steady energy source. If someone activated the acausal computer for a shorter time, that Quantum Flux would be *far* stronger — if activated only for a few minutes, it might well be a lethal effect preceding cause as operators rush to shut it down create the conditions that led to the emergency in the first place.

The Gorgon Karst

Innumerable wonders and horrors fill the corners of the world, the left-over relics of the age of novas and strange discoveries found among the stars. Some mysteries that pockmark the earth are older than the dawn of the Aberrants, though, and perhaps older than humanity itself. The Gorgon Karst, an impossibility threading its way beneath Europe, has borne witness to the fumbling efforts of baseline humans, Aberrants, and psions alike, and memorialized them forever within its crystalline passageways. When the species is long gone, the Karst will yet remain — an archive of memory caught in a form of petrified immortality.

The Labyrinth

The Gorgon Karst is an immense network of caves and channels running through deep rock. It sprawls from Germany in the west to Greece in the south and reaches as far as Ukraine and Russia in the east. Entrances are hard to find, however, because the labyrinth's connections to the surface world change and shift. Its internal topography defies conventional physics. Glittering grottoes open up onto expanses strewn with massive, water-smoothed cave pearls where what was once the floor is suddenly the ceiling. Passageways worn through multicolored bands of rock run for a few miles yet can take an explorer from the southern Shatter to northern Poland in that same distance. In one instance, ISRA surveyors passed through a series of narrow chambers, marveling at the beautiful speleothems they passed, only to find themselves back where they began — and attempting to leave the way they came had the same effect. A rescue team found their bodies a few days later, crusted over with crystalline growth from the floor, but did not experience the same trap of perspective.

As best anyone can tell, the Gorgon Karst has existed since the Classical era, and perhaps before.

DETECTING GORGON KARST PORTALS

Any psion can attempt to sense when they are near one of the Gorgon Karst's natural portals, if the portal is within their Attunement range. However, the cave's Quantum Flux interferes with noetic perceptions. Detecting a portal requires both deliberate concentration and making an Attunement roll at +5 Difficulty. Clears and teleporters reduce this difficulty to +3, and quantakinetics with one or more dots in Fundamentals suffer no increased Difficulty on this roll. Detecting that a portal has shifted its destination reduces this Difficulty by one.

Æon Trinity scientists believe accounts of the mythical underworld from that period may refer to real experiences from survivors of the Karst, and the same may be true of stories of chthonic mysteries across eastern and central Europe in the following two millennia. The Karst retains the evidence of its former discoverers like flies trapped in amber. Echoing memories and petrified forms of past explorers remain among the natural beauty of its galleries.

The Æon Trinity only recently learned the reason for the shifting nature of the Karst's entrances, which can open into abandoned mines, the recesses of more mundane cave systems, or even a centuries old basement carved into the local rock. Sections of the cave system with large amounts of Quantum Flux occasionally open spontaneous portals to other underground locations with specific sorts of crystals growing from their walls. Researchers theorize that the Gorgon Karst's crystals resonate with, and connect to, crystals in other underground locations. While a few are stable, most of these portals change location — one day opening on an abandoned Bohemian salt mine, the next into a natural cavern beneath Ukraine, and the day after to another portion of the Gorgon Karst. Some regularly cycle between the same few locations, while others never seem to open to the same location twice. Other than often subtle changes in rock, there are usually no visible clues as to the location of these portals.

The Gorgon Karst's inconstant nature, and the hazardous aspects of its interior, have kept the phenomenon's existence relatively obscure. Where an entrance has persisted for some time, due to chance or wildlife, humans have explored or exploited the Karst's interior, most notably a Soviet mining operation for a paranormal weaponry program. Documents pertaining to this program ultimately led the nova called Python to rediscover the Karst, and she built a fastness in its depths populated by her loyal followers. Her dramatic and rapid fall to Corruption drew Æon Trinity's attention to the phenomenon and scarred the caves with the legacy of her monstrous transformation.

THE GORGON EFFECT

The most striking trait of the Gorgon Karst is the manner in which it petrifies and preserves creatures within its galleries. Whether via entirely natural forces or the purposeful creation of some now-unknown power in the distant past, the Gorgon Karst contains crystalline formations and speleothems — structures formed by mineral deposits from the flow of water through the rock — that emanate low but consistent levels of Quantum Flux. Around major nodes, these form full-fledged Quantum Flux zones with the associated dangers thereof, but crystal growths across the whole network are psychoactive — they respond to brain activity from sufficiently developed consciousnesses.

The proximity of a mind stirs the Quantum Flux-tainted mineral formation processes into a hyperactive state. An explorer is in no immediate danger if she keeps moving through crystalline areas, or if she is in part of the Gorgon labyrinth without any major speleothems. However, settling in one place leads to the rapid accretion of mineral deposits around a being. Sitting down for too long among the immense crystals spearing through a cavern forces a scientist to break off the thin new fingers of the stuff pushing up around her. Sleeping amid the slick, almost-organic cave pearls of a beautiful chamber invites complete encasement overnight. Worse, the growths don't just coat a psychoactive stimulus; they begin to grow *inward*.

The upper areas of the Gorgon Karst are littered with the petrified forms of animals that found shelter in the caves; rats, bats, and birds gather in grottoes of crystal, bestial shapes, or stone-caulked parades. Æon Trinity scientists found several ancient species of note among the petrified creatures, including an immense cave-bear preserved in glittering facets, and the broken shape of an aurochs that presumably fell into a vertiginous entrance and was too wounded to escape. Explorers can find occasional human forms here as well, stooped in exhaustion or laid down to rest. Further in, the Gorgon Karst contains

a number of galleries showing off far greater numbers of mineralized humans — the burial chamber a Neolithic tribe used to inter their elders, the execution rooms where Soviet scientists purposefully caged prisoners for petrification, the water-slick chasm in which ancient Grecian explorers sat to rest during their search for the Underworld.

The Quantum Flux of the crystals doesn't just preserve the physical form, but also imprints with the mental echoes of victims. Simply touching a petrified creature or human causes a buzzing static in the mind as the crystals resonate. For simple beasts, the impressions that a human receives are near-incomprehensible without the talents of a telepath — just occasional base, inner surges of instinct, usually cloaked in final moments of animal fear. Greater sentience lends greater clarity, and a preserved human pours a shower of disconnected notions into the mind. Some bodies hold vivid memories like the smell of baking bread or rich spices, the shiver of a lover's touch, or the bright hues of the agora. Others reveal the last message an explorer focused on in her mind, the vivid image of a beautiful crystalline formation, or the leaden and sick weight of a convict's guilt as he contemplates what sins led him to his death here. The preservation isn't complete or coherent, just an impression of intense fragments from the psyche of the dead. Sometimes, though, these can hold interesting details.

In the case of psions, petrification also preserves some psionic capability. By touching the fossilized remains of such a psion — or shattering the corpse and taking the largest, most resonant piece — another psion or even a baseline human can use a single psionic power that the victim possessed of up to ••• rating. The user pays no cost in Psi points to activate the power and is considered to have a Psi rating of 1. However, the experience is sickening — inflicting a Bruised Condition on the user — and completely expends the crystal's power — wiping any lingering echoes of memory clean from it.

As well as growth stimulus via direct contact, the psychoactive crystals emit low frequency sounds in the presence of nearby minds. Enough mental activity from several people at once causes the speleothems to resonate with sufficient intensity as to make an audible humming noise, or even to start glowing faintly. The mental static of this resonance can be a problem for some psions and makes stealth difficult, but it can also serve as an early warning signal of an approaching Pythian.

PSYCHIC POWERS AND THE PETRIFIED

Clairsentients and telepaths can glean far more from the mineralized victims of the Gorgon Karst. For clairsentients, a petrified individual acts as a focal crystal (**Trinity Continuum: *Æon***, p. 290) recording five minutes of the perspective of the person or animal in question in vivid, total clarity, usually a period of particular emotional significance to them. For animals, that's often the final moments of their lives, but humans are far more varied. Telepathy treats a petrified victim as a still-living target for Deep Scan, with all memories treated as the Well-Guarded or Forgotten memory type.

The passage of time since the Gorgon Karst interred the victim causes no degradation or loss of clarity or information, and even shattered pieces of the victim retain these qualities as long as they're at least two centimeters in each dimension.

PYTHIAN (SUB-ABERRANT MUTANT)

Pythians are the former followers of the Aberrant Python, brought to her underground bastion in the Gorgon Karst and fallen to monstrous mutation after her transformation. Like their mistress, Pythians consumed parts of the crystalline carcasses littering the caves in hopes of achieving sight of future and past. Now, they are horrors with barely any trace of their former humanity and far more potent than most sub-Aberrant mutants, and even some Aberrants, through their constant exposure to the Gorgon effect.

A Pythian is a lumbering hulk of crystalline cancer and smooth, rocky tumors all woven together by the last vestiges of sinews and flesh. The whole form speaks of something almost crustacean in aspect, staggering on a mockery of human legs, with too many arms that terminate in crushing talons or scything pincers. No one is entirely sure how many Pythians maraud the depths of the Karst. They are directionless, existing in an almost dreamlike state as the memories of the innumerable crystalline dead they have consumed buzz relentlessly through their brains. Most Pythians treat the resonance of other living minds in the local Quantum Flux field

as a stimulus for intense, unthinking violence. A rare few show signs of greater intellect, and Æon Trinity explorers fear these things may even have influence over the Escher nightmare of tangled tunnels that is the Gorgon Karst, capable of trapping prey in looping passages or dead ends.

Primary Pool: 13 (Dreamlike Prophetic Utterances, Unthinking Violence)
Secondary Pool: 8 (Altering Karst Topography, Pursuit Through Caves, Shattering Stone)
Desperation Pool: 4
Defense: 4
Health: 5
Corruption: 2
Extras: Scale 1, +1 Enhancement (Cave Crawling)
Qualities: Armor Piercing, Petrification
Mutation: Mode Analogue (Locational Memory)

NEW QUALITY — PETRIFICATION

When the mutant strikes a target, the victim suffers +1 Difficulty on any movement-related rolls for the remainder of the scene. Every time the victim fails such a roll, the Difficulty increases by one, if it reaches +5, the victim is stuck in place until they pass a Difficulty 5 roll to break free.

THE WORLD BENEATH

As well as innumerable caves of dizzying natural beauty, crystalline grottoes, light Quantum Flux zones, and chasms where mad Pythians burble, the Gorgon Karst contains several significant locations.

New Delphi is the underground city Python created with her followers. Now it is a hollow, empty place, long deserted by the maddened survivors. Aberrant technology and excellent building materials mean New Delphi mostly still stands, crushed in a few places by tectonic movement but otherwise lit and powered. A covert team of researchers and operatives from Magyarorszag is constructing an outpost here; that nation's government recently discovered the Karst and is trying to keep it as quiet as possible while mapping out the strange realm's potential use against other states in Eastern Europe.

The remains of *Python* herself stand in a very deep cave, though the Karst's bizarre topography tends to draw explorers to it. Here, amid a heavy Quantum Flux zone (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 192) and huge, glittering columns of crystal, the Aberrant's petrified remains lie among the shattered banquet of mineral dead she gorged upon in her final hours. The very air itself shimmers and warps under the

pressure of the immense forces at work. Whispers of past and present spill forth from the stone in garbled prophecies. Attempts to understand and exploit this phenomenon have stalled in the face of the dangers presented by such intense Quantum Flux.

The Æon Trinity has identified innumerable *galleries* throughout the Karst, particular areas that must have been easily accessible in different eras. The Orphean Gallery marks the farthest distance ancient Grecian explorers reached before calcifying among their ancestors. The tongue-in-cheek naming of the Gulag belies the grim nature of the Soviet "mine," where they left prisoners to calcify before removing them to the surface for use in early quantum-state experiments. The Salt Mines appear to be a breach into the network from a more mundane mining operation, where the workers tried to follow seams of Gorgon minerals only to fall victim to it themselves. Ancient mine workings still lie in the tunnels, encrusted with crystals.

The Æon Trinity maintains a base of operations accessed via a stable Karst entrance in northern Greece. Nicknamed *Medusa* by operatives, the base is modern and sophisticated, featuring extensive analytical sensors to monitor Quantum Flux levels within the cave network. Corrosive chemical sprays clean approaching tunnels of psychoactive crystal growths, and gun turrets provide some protection from Pythian attacks. A small staff of psions rotates through the base, although numbers have recently increased following the discovery of an operation harvesting dead psions in the caves.

A GRIM HARVEST

The Gorgon Karst is a massive security vulnerability. The Æon Trinity isn't sure how many of the feuding powers of Eastern Europe are aware the Karst exists and are working to keep it as hidden as possible. The region is already tense; an underground network, tainted by Quantum Flux, capable of moving people across the region and with exits that could turn up anywhere, would be enough to stir the heightened paranoia into a frenzy — or to lure governments into seeing it as an opportunity for victory.

Unfortunately, knowledge of the Karst is slowly spreading, and the Æon Trinity has no way as yet of pinning down all the entrances. As well as possible government interest, surviving elements of the Aberrant cult dedicated to Python and her pronunciations of founding a "New Delphi" underground seek to find access to the promised subterranean paradise. Other Aberrants close to Python likely knew of her underworld kingdom's existence, too. Worst of all, though, are the perpetrators of a completely new atrocity in the Karst.

Last month, Æon Trinity agents discovered a recently breached cave with the shattered remnants of several recently mineralized humans and two dead victims yet to fully petrify. Psionic investigation rapidly revealed the dead were all psions, drugged or injured then interred to petrify. Someone is abducting and murdering psions to harvest their psi-imprinted crystals, presumably to sell on the black market or use for illicit activities. What is not yet clear is whether this is the work of a small criminal operation, or a government that has decided to process psions into tools.

HADLEY RILLE, ANOMALY L-24656-C — MARE SERENETATIS, LUNA

In July of 1971, David Scott and James Irwin landed just east of Hadley Rille, a sinuous depression on the surface of the moon. At the time, scientists believed flowing water carved the channel, but further evidence has proven that the real culprit for these rilles are subsurface magma floes which carved out lava tubes that later collapsed, leaving the characteristic channels. After three days and a total of 18 hours of EVA work, Apollo 15 departed the Lunar surface and returned home. No other human being would set foot in the vicinity of Hadley Rille for 142 years.

A year ago, Orgotek surveyors arrived on the scene hoping to find subsurface excursions of the collapsed tube, both to enable easier access to mineral deposits and to determine whether the site might serve to support human habitation inside those lava tubes. While they were successful, in that they did indeed locate several promising caves, they nonetheless immediately placed the project on hold and quietly forwarded their findings to the

Æon Trinity. The Orgotek team found something impossible under Hadley Rille: a doorway to a subterranean cavity that, according to all seismological study (including core samples of the area in question), *was not there*.

HADLEY STATION

Hadley Station is a multinational effort under the auspices of the Æon Trinity. The station has sufficient habitat space and resources to support a permanent crew of just over 300. Most of the surface infrastructure consists of prefabricated structures for spaceship landing and maintenance, while the subsurface tunnels that make up the lion's share of the station contain living space and laboratories. The station connects directly to the lava tube containing Anomaly L-24656-C (otherwise known as "the Hadley Anomaly" or simply "the Anomaly" among station residents), through a series of airlocks and decontamination chambers.

Roughly half of Hadley Station's permanent residents are members of the multidisciplinary science team directly engaged with studying the Anomaly, with the remainder split evenly between the maintenance and engineering teams that keep the installation running and the diplomatic representatives and administrators from virtually every major nation and psi order.

THE ANOMALY

It's not much to look at, just an irregularly shaped but perfectly flat surface standing upright, slick, and seemingly oily, about four meters across by seven meters tall. When discovered, only part of the Anomaly was visible, with most of it embedded within the lava tube — excavations have since revealed its true shape. It maintains the same position relative to its surroundings, about six inches off the surface of the chamber excavated around it. Testing by psychokinetics and electrokinetics has confirmed that the Anomaly does not interact in any meaningful way with electromagnetic or gravitational fields. Scientists have yet to determine why the Anomaly remains perfectly stationary, considering the moon (and the rest of the solar system) does not. The Æon Trinity festooned the chamber in which the Anomaly rests with sensors of every kind. Also, a bulky frame around the outside of the Anomaly protects users from its molecular-sharp edge. Only the faces of the Anomaly permit safe transit.

Travel through the Anomaly into its interior is instantaneous but does not begin until the traveler (or object) has passed entirely into the Anomaly's face. The few who have transited the Anomaly thus far report no subjective experience of waiting, however, merely emerging on the far side as though they'd simply stepped through a door. The far side itself is, like the Lunar side, free-floating.

Researchers have not yet fully mapped the interior of the Anomaly, but their limited data has been enough to extrapolate the basic dimensions and features of the cavity: a rough sphere 15 kilometers across. A miniature sun floats in the center of the sphere, its brightness waxing and waning in a 31-hour cycle. There is no gravity inside the sphere — instead, the "sun" emits a constant force in all directions, varying between .97g at "noon" (maximum luminosity) and .81g at "midnight" (minimum luminosity) respectively. Consequently, "down" is always in the direction of the sphere's inner surface, regardless of wherever on the sphere's 700 square kilometers of surface area one stands.

Physics within the Anomaly differs from the rest of the universe, such that a plurality of the science team is convinced that the Anomaly is, in fact, another dimension partially intersecting our own. Advanced technology is extremely unreliable within the Anomaly, which has complicated efforts to study it remotely with drones — something about

PHYSICS AND TECHNOLOGY INSIDE THE ANOMALY

The physics of the Anomaly's interior are similar enough to our universe to allow life to exist. Beyond that, it differs wildly. For instance, objects with a larger surface area fall faster than objects with small ones, because gravity here is a repulsive force, similar to Le Sage's "particle rain" theory. By far, the greatest problem for scientists exploring the Anomaly is that technology simply doesn't work right. Batteries drain rapidly, integrated circuits fail, and so on.

All hardtech suffers a +3 Complication for the first 12 hours inside the Anomaly, rising to a +5 Complication after that. After 24 hours, virtually all hardtech fails outright. Noetic biotech fares little better, suffering a +2 or +4 Complication, respectively. When attuned to a psion, noetic biotech does not shut down after 24 hours, but continues to malfunction in unpredictable ways.

WE DID THE MATH FOR YOU

The following is a short table of common measures of time and their rough equivalents from the perspective of observers both inside and outside the Anomaly.

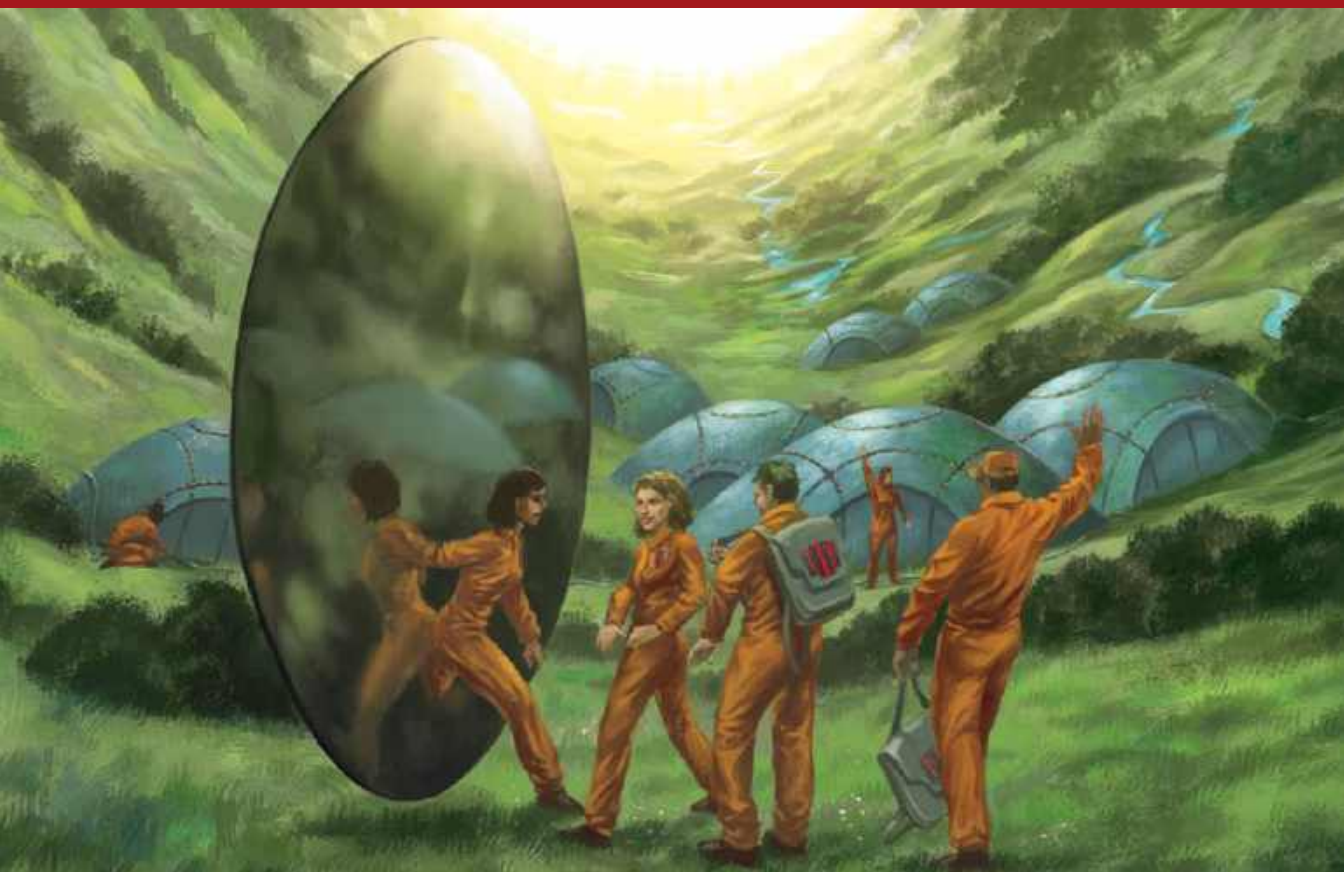
Time	Inside-to-Outside	Outside-to-Inside
1 min.	2/5ths of a second	2.5 hours
1 hour	25 seconds	6 days
1 day	10 mins.	4.8 months
1 week	70 mins.	2 years, 9 months
1 month	5 hours	11 years, 10 months
1 year	2.5 days	144 years

the Anomaly just makes them stop working, even if they have battery capacity and enough onboard intelligence to navigate for themselves. In addition, time flows at a highly accelerated rate within the Anomaly: for every second outside the Anomaly, 144 seconds pass inside it.

THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY

Characters who venture into the Anomaly discover a strange but verdant world. Almost-recognizable flora and fauna that's just a *little* off from normal are everywhere. This side of the Anomaly floats in a forest, inside a boundary demarcated with ancient-looking stone pillars about a person's height, carved with fading symbols that are clearly some manner of writing. Ivy-analogues grow over some, but someone appears to have cared for most of the pillars. Beyond these markers, the forest thins out somewhat, and through the canopy much of this strange world becomes visible.

Looking up, the Anomaly's interior presents the impression of standing at the bottom of an enormous bowl. The glare and haze surrounding the sun hides the far side of the Anomaly (the South Pole, to use the scientists' term, opposite the North where the



Anomaly stands). Even at local midnight, this sun is still bright enough to be difficult to look at. The immediate surroundings are, therefore, easily visible, and navigation is not that difficult once one adapts to the new perspective.

Light woodlands cover most of the interior, while the rest is rolling hills and grasslands. A few points reach sufficient elevation that they might deserve the name "mountain," but they'd be no more than large hills on Earth. Several lakes dot the interior, but there are no rivers to speak of — only a few trickling streams that feed into those lakes, the water bubbling up seemingly from nowhere.

THE VAXIS

Early forays into the Anomaly failed to grasp one of the most important details of the interior: Humans live there. Perhaps the strangest thing about the locals is that they're perfectly human. Short — about five-feet on average — but muscular, they almost universally have a fireplug build and deeply tanned skin, with an indeterminate ethnic ancestry. They speak a language that, while it displays some roots common to Indo-European languages, is sufficiently different that the project's linguists consider it unrelated to other languages. They call themselves the Vaxis.

Scattered around the Anomaly's interior are half a dozen towns and villages, previously unseen due to their distance from the Anomaly-side portal. Constructed of wood and stone, the local technological level seems to be somewhere between the Neolithic and Bronze Ages — most tools are of chipped stone, with metal being practically nonexistent. Agriculture is intensive, making use of techniques not developed until much later, such as crop rotations that suggest an advanced understanding of soil chemistry that the Vaxis otherwise lack. Upon further investigation, researchers learned that Vaxis salvaged what little metal is on display from crashed drones sent in to explore the Anomaly. This makes the material a relatively recent development even by Vaxis standards, so it's primarily reserved for ritual use — the Vaxis believe it to be a divine gift or signal, as they have no other context with which to interpret it.

The Vaxis divide themselves along tribal lines, living separately but coming together for religious festivals and observances. While the overall number of tribes remains unclear, the largest are the Kerwos, Sawat, Tarus, Shika, and Ferso tribes. These five tribes are the heart of culture, politics, and trade among the Vaxis, dominating the culture-wide drive to secure, protect, and carefully shepherd resources. Currently, the Ferso are preeminent (at least, if the amount of metal a tribe is able to publicly display is anything to go by), but both the Kerwos and the Shika are close rivals. The overall Vaxis population is around 23,000, and though the population is by now thoroughly interrelated, the different tribes do have slightly distinct gene pools.

While the locals are aware of the portal leading into and out of the Anomaly, they consider it to be a sacred object and never venture near it, save for priestesses who ritually maintain the marker stones and propitiate the standoffish god within to reserve its wrath. They have no concept of a world beyond this one, or at least, not of any world that outsiders would recognize as the world they came from — their religion revolves primarily around sun-worship, with a dash of animism on the side. The sun, they say, is the lord of the universe, whose eye is upon each and every soul, and whose gaze pierces all.

THE FORGOTTEN AND THE SACRED

Vaxis settlements are not the only points of interest within the Anomaly. Scattered seemingly at random around the interior are enormous temples of black stone containing the dilapidated hulks of ancient Nova Age technology. These structures are thousands of years old, and according to the Vaxis have always been present, though they're clearly of human make and likely constructed by Vaxis ancestors long ago. The Vaxis have adopted them as sites for religious rites, and a few in particular are of great importance in the Vaxis calendar.

Most of the technology within is, at this point, nothing but junk. Most data storage simply doesn't have the lifespan necessary to survive 8,000 years. There are a few exceptions, however. One temple contains a nova tech mining robot that locals worship as a god, and while its safety subroutines have degraded significantly over the course of millennia, it is theoretically ready to activate if provided with sufficient power to do so. Carvings located around the interior of the temple record the various command phrases, and though of an older tongue, Vaxis priestesses are able to read and speak aloud the magical incantations needed to propitiate the god.

VISITORS

Isolated for 8,000 years, the Vaxis are understandably unaccustomed to strange visitors, especially giants with magical powers who passed through the

portal in the forbidden area. Vaxis treat visitors with suspicion, even if they attempt to fit in — their culture is both foreign and *very* deep, making it difficult to play oneself off as a traveler from another part of this very small world. Every adult (and most children) can name a fellow Vaxis' tribal affiliation from clothing, tattoos, accent, or even the way they laugh.

The Vaxis are not superstitious per se. They understand that many of their ritual observances are the legacy of lost knowledge once possessed by ancient elders. For instance, the Vaxis always boil water before consuming it or using it for cooking or medical purposes and are fastidious about cleanliness when faced with injury or sickness. They know this helps keep them safe, even if they don't know about the germ theory of medicine. That said, some things are beyond explanation; if a psion uses her powers openly, she can expect the Vaxis to treat her like an incarnate god, or at the very least a powerful spirit trying to look human but not doing a very good job.

OUT-OF-CONTEXT PROBLEMS

For the Vaxis, the arrival of people from outside their universe is nothing short of apocalyptic. In the long run, it will provoke conflicts, even wars, as the various tribes jockey for control of this new resource. They might even direct violence at the visitors, hoping to drive them away to preserve the status quo. At the same time, arguments rage on the Luna side of the Anomaly concerning the ultimate fate for the Vaxis — the debate over whether and how to resettle them on Earth or a colony world swirls around and around without end.

At the same time, the visitors themselves pose a threat to the Vaxis. Isolated for so long, their immune systems won't be able to cope with the resurgence of (to them) ancient diseases. While modern medical care and especially Vitakinesis can resolve this problem, the scale and the speed with which any illness would spread through the Vaxis population is nothing short of staggering. Similarly, exposure to outside ideas will inevitably disrupt the local culture, further exacerbating instability.

ORIGINS

For all the Anomaly's mystery, its beginnings were very close-to-home. In 2067, just prior to the Chinese Ultimatum, tempers flared among the Space Brigade, the Aberrants who had seized control of Olympus on Luna, and one of their number became the scapegoat for all the Brigade's myriad problems. Shunned by its fellows, the Aberrant took its toys (enslaved humans) and left, translocating them from the South Lunar Pole to Hadley Rille's magma tubes, which it kept pressurized by sheer force of will as it fumed and raged at the perceived injustice. Over time, its thoughts grew inward, even as the humans pleaded with it to give them somewhere, *anywhere* that was safer to live than an ancient magma tube. A solution to both problems became apparent: The Aberrant *made* that place, ripping a gaping hole in space-time and ushering its captives through.

Whether the Anomaly was initially as it is now, none can say — the oral legends of the Vaxis simply don't record the early days of the Anomaly's existence. Given the rate at which time passes within the Anomaly, it's been roughly 8,000 years since humans first arrived here, about the same length of time in the universe outside the Anomaly as it's been since humans started giving up the hunter-gatherer lifestyle in favor of intensive agriculture and sedentary life. Civilization has collapsed at least thrice within the Anomaly over the course of that time, and the facts have been muddied by intertribal rivalries, religious grudges, and simple confusion.

Whither the Aberrant itself? The locals don't seem to experience a significant rate of Quantum Flux diseases (though their legends speak of terrible plagues in the past), and don't display any immediately recognizable mutations that couldn't be put down to 8,000 years of genetic isolation. There is, however, a source of Quantum Flux energies within the Anomaly itself — the sun. Brightening and dimming like clockwork, it almost gives the impression of breathing, because *that's exactly what it's doing*. The sun *is* the Aberrant, hibernating within a cloud of brilliant plasma (or maybe it *is* the plasma), gestating as it transforms into something so strange that the physics of our reality were insufficient to contain it.

Fortunately for any visitors, the Aberrant is not aware enough to notice their arrival. It experiences time (and indeed existence itself) in a fundamentally different frame of reference and is not at the moment fully conscious. It has focused all its attention on the inhumanly complex task it has set itself — incubating within this pocket dimension as it transforms itself into an entirely new universe, one that will boil up out of the Anomaly and overwrite the universe the Aberrant grew tired of. Conditions within the Anomaly's sun are notably similar to simulations of how the early universe might have looked — a precursor, perhaps, to a second Big Bang.

Tensions Ahead

The FSA representative to Hadley Station, General Morton Briggs, has maintained from the beginning that as an FSA corporation discovered the Anomaly, the efforts to study it should be solely under the jurisdiction of the FSA itself. Consequently, he talks over others whenever he can and routinely issues orders despite not being in a position of executive authority. If the investigators confirm the presence of an Aberrant within the Anomaly, he will immediately begin insisting upon an all-out assault to destroy it or the Anomaly itself.

If the Aberrant itself awakens, the consequences will be dire. A nigh transcendent being, its destructive potential is almost incalculable, and the fact that it will be sluggishly attempting to respond to events almost beneath its notice will not ameliorate this fact. If it interrupts its gestation to assume a more active form, "gravity" within the Anomaly will cease to exist. The amount of light will, if anything, increase to a downright dangerous magnitude — if the Aberrant emerges from the Anomaly and returns to the surface of Luna, it will likely be visible from Earth. The only saving grace is that the Aberrant's form is inherently unstable, both because of its near-total transformation into a highly energetic state and the half-baked nature of its incubation. It will probably not be able to endure our reality long enough to do much more than seriously damage or potentially destroy Luna before sublimating.

The Lambent Chancel

Boom. There it goes. The whole block's lights flare up bright for a moment as the power surge rides high through innumerable circuits and systems, its signal dancing along wireless devices and blizzarding users' senses with static and glitches. Pitch darkness follows the brief illumination as the lights gutter out and systems drop offline. Every technological object and link goes utterly dead for a few seconds. Then comes the *thrum*, the sound of all those electronics gently waking back up. Now, though, something's wrong. Something's *different*. Vivid colors flicker into existence in overlays of light and movement, scratching intense lines through the dark. Bizarre patterns wash over walls and ceilings. Phantasmagorical holograms judder into place by projectors or twirl out of the optics of minicomps. Then someone touches one, and things get a whole lot weirder.

The Lambent Chancel is here, made manifest from data and light for one beautiful, hypnotic, hallucinogenic night.

The Chancel emerges into reality in fits and starts, crackling into life amid urban sprawl. It often appears in derelict or empty structures, overwriting the local fabric of space-time with its own unique take for a few hours before retreating once again. Sometimes, though, it manifests in an inhabited building and causes chaos.

Most authorities assume reports about the Chancel are an extensive hack of local systems via the OpNet, hijacking holographic projectors and devices in an anarchic display that triggers mass hysteria or delusion. A few, including the Æon Trinity and Orgotek, know better. The Lambent Chancel is something akin to a mass hack, yes, but it does more than just control electronics. It uses them as a gateway to imprint itself into reality, creating a brief fusion of code and fundamental physics. In those moments, image becomes solid, and data shapes space and time. The digital contents of this OpNet-delivered revelation *become* real, allowing crossover between conceptual knowledge and physical manifestation.

For hackers and technological researchers, the Lambent Chancel is a holy grail. For authorities, it's a potential security nightmare. The Chancel isn't just a random anomaly, though. It's a purposeful thing, a place and time of worship, an interface between the sacred and the profane. Someone *controls* the Chancel and uses it to their own ends.

Reality Breakdown

A Lambent Chancel manifestation is a light Quantum Flux zone that encompasses a single building or structure with electronics that connect to the OpNet. Prior to the reduction in Quantum Flux zones that occurred in 2104, the Chancel manifested as a moderate Quantum Flux zone. It never occurs outside of an urban structure, and never reaches outside. The structure doesn't need to be intact or modern, however. Also, no matter how large a building is, the Chancel is always contained in an area no larger than a single city block — its Quantum reality alternation can temporarily override local OpNet protocols, but precautions put in place after the Crash prevent it from spreading. No one knows how it travels

from one location to another, but everyone is certain it doesn't do so via the OpNet.

Within the Quantum Flux zone, reality warps. The Chancel can manifest constructs of light and data that are fundamentally physical, emerging from electronics via pulses of code. Usually, a device will spit out several constructs relating to its content or use — the minicomp on an inhabitant's wrist vomits forth a number of shining, plate-sized icons into the air, a juddering phantasm of an actor from the last show she watched, and the smiling faces of the friends on her contacts list. A human can touch and manipulate these images, which have quite physical heft and presence. As well as this garbage code dump, the Chancel produces more purposeful creations. Winding vines of hard light grow throughout the residence, blooming into beautiful flowers of scrolling information. News feeds pour down the walls or bubble up from the floor, with key phrases and words lifting into the air to form matrices of linked events. Designs of ancient architecture overlay mundane, drab surfaces to briefly convert rooms into Grecian agora or corridors into ancient Nahua temples.

Within the Quantum Flux zone, characters can use the Enigmas skill to create physical objects out of OpNet code, directly programming a minicomp or other device to produce the item they want with a Difficulty equal to the Enhancement bonus it would provide. They can also directly manipulate the Chancel's manifestations to hack or create code by pairing Enigmas with an Attribute from the Physical Arena, bending or sculpting flowing information with their fingers before feeding it back into a device; successfully sculpting the information provides the user with 3 points of Enhancement to create the desired object. The effects are more extreme for electrokinetics. A psion with the Technokinesis Mode can use it to create effects within the Chancel's Quantum Flux zone as if he possessed the Transmutation Mode of Quantakinesis and the Telekinesis Mode of Psychokinesis.

The Chancel can conjure up servitors of its own. These are either chimera born from jumbled OpNet content, or entities made to fit the backdrop that the Chancel imposes on the zone; naiads and satyrs for a Grecian temple, or neon mimics of popular OpNet stars for a pulsing nightclub pasted onto the base reality of a mundane basement. Each servitor has the characteristics of a sub-Aberrant mutant with qualities and dice pool focuses appropriate to its form. If something "destroys" a servitor, making it collapse into incoherence, the Chancel cannot replace it for roughly an hour.

THE LAMBENT FLUX

As a Quantum Flux zone, the Chancel is deleterious to organic health with extensive exposure. The Lambent Chancel presents a rather different form of Quantum Flux diseases than more common forms of Corruption. Secondary Quantum Flux diseases from the Chancel come not from mutated pathogens, but Corrupted systems and devices — and primary Quantum Flux diseases don't affect humans at all, instead infecting SIs or any actual AIs unlucky enough to be present.

Chancel diseases present as electronic gremlins, with characters struggling as glitches and errors plague their devices. Sometimes a disease infects a minicomp and causes it to veritably drown in spam from the OpNet's darkest recesses, or to open wireless connections freely and without any security whatsoever. All software the character interacts with may rapidly corrupt and fail, or any attempt to register her name and details in an electronic database result in only nonsense information.

Rumors have it that some intelligence operatives willingly expose themselves to the Chancel's Quantum Flux for precisely this information-scrambling effect, covering their tracks among surveillance and databases by letting the disease wreck any attempt to record their passage. The same rumors have it that, eventually, the disease becomes truly physical, and grotesquely mutative in a monstrous union of electronics and flesh. Most afflicted can clear the gremlins fairly easily, it just requires ditching all their personal electronics and remaining isolated from such devices for a couple of days.

As well as constructs and servitors, the Chancel can also manifest what may be the masters of this strange domain — the Choir.

CHOIR AND CONGREGATION

The Choir are an urban legend, an OpNet myth, and a prize sought out by those in the know. People who know of them claim they're master hackers and security experts, holding a place somewhere between mystical sages and terrifying judges in the deep esoterica of the online community. They're also quite real.

The Chancel doesn't manifest itself at random, although the patterns of its appearance might seem that way at first glance. While months can pass between manifestations, certain signs — omens, as it were — forewarn of its arrival. Cryptic comments on OpNet communities, messages hidden in the glitches briefly distorting major advertising campaigns, and in a few cases, direct communications to people the Choir's interested in, can all lead investigators to the time and place in which the Chancel will appear. Several secretive groups of hackers and electronic enthusiasts try to piece together the Choir's schedule each time, and actually managing to attend it can earn one brief superstar status among the Chancel-spotters.

The Choir emerges from the OpNet in this way to do business. Sometimes, the Chancel becomes like a hallucinogenic marketplace, thronging with odd visitors there to play with the physical code, contact other specialists and underworld fixers, and petition for an audience with one of the Choir themselves. Other times, the manifestation plays host only to a select few, each specifically invited to discuss and perhaps trade knowledge or software while servitors keep out the unwanted rabble. Upon occasion, it's just a raucous party, especially the times it emerges into an inhabited building.

The Choir deal in data. They buy and sell secrets, especially those plucked from the depths of secure archives and heavily protected information vaults beyond the OpNet's reach. They trade finely crafted hacking software and codes that can get one past premium-grade defenses. They connect talented contractors to trustworthy employers forced to work outside the law. Sometimes they give gifts to those who catch their eye with a particularly entertaining intrusion into a high-profile system, shaping raw code out of the air into custom-tailored invasion packages that they pour into a minicomp.

Choir members appear entirely human but emerge from the same matter/code admixture as the rest of the Quantum Flux zone's phenomena. They garb themselves in lambent light-forms modeled on whatever backdrop they've thrown onto the night's location but appear uniformly older in appearance; whether man or woman, a Choir member is silver-haired and lined of face. Each appears to have a distinct personality and mannerisms but refer to themselves only as the Choir. Chancel followers have given them labels; the Patrician is always calm but welcoming, the Hawk asks penetrating questions and rapidly loses her patience with fools, the

GIFTS OF THE CHOIR

Characters who meet the Choir and benefit from its generosity can gain significant benefits. Choir intrusion software can provide significant Enhancement bonuses or may lower the successes needed for particular hacking stunts when subverting a system. They also always increase the Difficulty for an agent using countermeasures against the hacker.

Just using the Chancel's reality to work code itself allows a character to attempt a single milestone in an Enigmas roll to create Advanced, Inspired, or Super-Science software in only a few minutes rather than however long it would usually take. A single visit only allows an attempt at a single milestone but may also allow for a piece of software to inflict truly bizarre effects on the physical world via Quantum manipulation.

Priestess seems to offer sympathetic questions and suggestions but has a knack for finding painful vulnerabilities, and so forth. To vitakinetics, the Choir doesn't register as alive; to electrokinetics, the Choir consists of the same impossible confusion of data as the surrounding Quantum Flux zone.

Managing to shut the area of the Chancel off from the OpNet immediately terminates the Quantum Flux zone and any Choir presence, but no one has successfully found where the Corruption of the code actually stems from in the first place. The best anyone has managed is the talented information security specialist //QuidProProxy//, who claims that he managed to trace the signal that the Chancel originated from and found it came from the primary Paris OpNet hub. That hub has presumably been nothing more than ashes for the last few years, but //QuidProProxy//'s evidence is clear. Those who don't scoff at his claim assume it's just another part of the quantum wizardry that allows code to become reality in the Chancel's bosom.

Some seek out the Chancel because they want to experience the raw strangeness of the phenomena, or to see if this urban legend is real. Others come looking for the opportunity to try and work data in an entirely new medium; certainly, a few who have reached the Chancel have achieved amazing works in the brief time they can manipulate its nature. Some want to trade with the Choir or sit at their feet and petition for tutelage and enlightenment.

Some, of course, want to destroy it.

DESECRATING THE CHANCEL

Unsurprisingly, authorities aware of the Lambent Chancel find it absolutely *horrifying*. A mobile Quantum Flux zone that can "download" itself into reality anywhere, at any time, via the OpNet? A nigh-untraceable black market and gathering point for hackers and criminals? A collective of manipulative beings who might be Aberrants living in the network, might be the digital ghosts of French intelligence operatives, or might be something entirely alien? The very notion gives most governmental intelligence agencies seizures.

The Chancel is very good at hiding its tracks, but from time to time local authorities shut down or raid a manifestation. Sensible authorities just shut off OpNet access, killing the zone entirely. Foolish ones rush police and their own information specialists in to try and analyze the phenomena or somehow capture the digital ghosts of the Choir. Given the Choir can literally manipulate reality and spawn servitors within a Chancel zone, these incidents tend to result in casualties.

The Æon Trinity and Orgotek are both pursuing parallel investigations of their own into the Chancel. The very real possibility that this is the work of an Aberrant demands investigation and the tracing of the source. The underlying principles that the Chancel uses to manifest itself fascinates Orgotek, the ability to replicate and deploy something similar would be a huge asset for electrokinetic psions. These organizations take a less heavy-handed approach to investigations, trying to insinuate agents into the communities that attract Choir attention. Rising stars in the information security and hacking spheres alike are tempting targets both for hiring and for digital surveillance, hoping to find a path in past the Chancel's rigorous vetting.

MOBILE OCEANIC ANOMALY 3

The ocean holds innumerable mysteries, and even Oceania's many aquas have barely scratched the surface of what lies in the deep. One such enigma is MOA3, or Mobile Oceanic Anomaly 3, the largest of the MOA class of sea-floor anomalies detected by modern science. It is an enormous structure on the floor of the Indian Ocean, believed to be at least two miles wide, and moving at a rate of 30 to 50 miles a year in erratic paths. Attempts to remotely view it with psionic powers have shown MOA3 to be — or at least to include — a medium Quantum Flux zone, and the depth at which it exists has discouraged physical exploration. For now, academics assume it is sunken detritus from the Aberrant War, pulled hither and thither by oceanic currents.

OTHER MOAS

Part of an international database of oceanic features collated following the Aberrant War, the MOA list covers unknown, but interesting or potentially dangerous, anomalies detected at sea. The first ones on the list are the largest or strongest signals, but the full register includes 3,455 entries — most of which are shipwrecks pushed by tides or other such mundane explanations.

MOA1 is actually a still-functional Aberrant undersea settlement, usually derelict but sometimes used by Poseidon's followers as a base of operations. MOA2, associated with several strange sonic pulses, is a major Norça submarine base, entirely biotech in nature. MOA4 is nearly as large as MOA3, but several investigators have gotten close enough to see it is a strangely smooth, massive stone with no obvious means of ingress, moving very slowly along the ocean floor via means unknown — it regularly travels against prevailing tides.

MOA5, a vague reading that sometimes surfaces from the Atlantic trenches, is a huge colony organism over a mile wide. It's an invasive alien species, carried to Earth by inadequate quarantine measures in the early days of Upeo wa Macho interstellar exploration. It's largely harmless, and indeed produces several unusual chemicals currently unknown to human science that would be of medical use if exploited.

Mobile Oceanic Anomaly 3 is indeed a relic of the war, albeit no corroded tangle of collapsed debris from warships burning with Quantum fire or foundering nova sea-habitats. MOA3 began its existence in orbit as the exosphere stronghold of a small band of interventionist novas styling themselves as the New Wardens. Serving as both operational center and containment facility, the "Eudaemon" platform used Aberrant technology to imprison a whole raft of different inmates and to store strange or dangerous materials. At the height of the Aberrant War, Eudaemon suffered critical damage from a Chinese attack and underwent a controlled de-orbit into the seas south of India.

Most observers presumed the impact and subsequent sinking killed everyone aboard, with the Aberrants of the New Wardens dying in the defense of their platform. Eudaemon dropped out of public awareness, just another footnote in the story of growing nova arrogance and the atrocities of the war.

THE DROWNED PRISON

As warning klaxons howled and Eudaemon descended from the sky trailing fire, most of the inmates of the orbital platform believed death was upon them. Screaming wind ripped through the gaping holes in its superstructure, and billowing columns of flame incinerated entire swathes of the interior. The crash itself killed many, as did the waters that poured into the sinking wreck. The slaughter likely would have been complete if this were an uncontrolled landing — but it wasn't. The last surviving New Warden, a gravity manipulator called Lockdown, used Eudaemon's engines and her own power to slow the descent enough that the super-science of the platform's construction could withstand the crash and cushion many of its inhabitants.

Eudaemon sank rapidly, but undamaged sections still possessed sufficient environmental sealing to maintain atmospheric integrity. After another, final impact onto the ocean floor that crushed several more compartments, the core of Eudaemon remained intact — including the vital reactors and life support modules. It was enough for the survivors to cling to life.

Initially, Lockdown and her loyal cadre of remaining baseline prison wardens extended Eudaemon's comm array and tried to broadcast rescue

frequencies, while securing what they could of those prison wards and containment facilities that remained intact. Alerts across the remaining structure indicated innumerable minor breaches, small fires, and other issues that needed immediate engineering attention. The first few hours saw fighting with escaped inmates, and the wholesale jettisoning of some modules deemed unrecoverable. The tide turned when Fomorian, an aquatic Aberrant prisoner, seized control of the external systems while a team of prisoners managed to take life support offline.

An announcement then came over the comms — the wardens could either die from suffocation, or surrender. Terra, an Aberrant prisoner with powers over earth and plants, had escaped the full spectrum quarantine of her cell and transformed her former ward into a botanical lung. Those who joined her retinue would survive. Everyone else would perish.

Some of the baseline wardens died in a final attempt to dislodge the uprising from life support. Some surrendered to the former inmates, though this was no guarantee of survival. Lockdown herself chose to stand and fight, so the surviving Aberrants who had once been her prisoners killed her.

And there Eudaemon sat upon the seabed for the next 10 years, as the skeleton crew of survivors tried first to hold the wreck together — and then to rebuild it.

THE CRAWLER

Mobile Oceanic Anomaly 3 is now an immense work of Aberrant technology built around the remaining core of Eudaemon. Ungainly and irregular, its body is the space station — an agglomeration of huge blocky prison-modules, spherical containment facilities, and the beating heart of the hyperfusion reactors at its core. From that original form bud newer struts and pods of cannibalized material, and underneath it is an enormous organic mass — a colossal tangle of plant-matter tendrils and roots, worming down into the oozing mud of the ocean floor. This is Terra's work over the last five years, an elemental arrangement of seaweed and earth that slowly drags MOA3 along. As it goes, aquatic sub-Aberrant mutants emerge to harvest needed resources from the surrounding seascape.

MOA3 continues to fall apart. The enslaved inhabitants face a daily struggle to hold back the inexorable advance of the sea. Most of the containment facilities remain too dangerous to enter, let alone exploit. The life support systems failed for good years ago, and now the survivors rely entirely on Terra's organic lung — an entire prison ward filled with twisted vegetation that cycles oxygen and drinks down seawater, budding forth fleshy, sour-tasting fruit that provide potable water and needed sustenance. Fomorian

could have left years ago, but Terra persuaded him and the other Aberrants that, in the wake of the war's end above, they had to remain in place and hidden. She's thus been able to keep her little fiefdom together through personal charisma and controlling the means of survival.

SUNKEN SOCIETY

The New Wardens held all manner of prisoners aboard Eudaemon. They incarcerated baseline and nova alike who they believed to be a serious danger to international stability, later also taking on contracts for high-risk or unwanted but otherwise mundane convicts from planet-bound authorities. Originally acting as both judge and jury in an arrogant act of interventionism, the New Wardens became another part of the prison industry, albeit a very high-security one. This metaphorical corruption of purpose came alongside the direct Corruption of Quantum Flux. By the end, several of the prison warden employees were also sub-Aberrant mutants budding with eyes, created by the Aberrant called Panopticon, to keep watch over everything held within. The remaining baseline wardens were fanatically loyal.

Now, the surviving Aberrant prisoners from that time rule the drowned wreck of Eudaemon. They see no kinship with the baseline prisoners, lording over normal humans. Everyone who is not an Aberrant is effectively a slave. Only the favored few, those chosen to become sub-Aberrant mutants, possess any degree of freedom. Even here, Fomorian keeps its ghastly and terrified mutant followers on a tight leash. Terra has been very clear to her ally that they can't afford any of the water-breathers to escape their grasp for now.

Most of the former wardens died, even after surrendering, and the Aberrants deemed the few survivors the lowest of the low, slaves below even the prisoners. Only Panopticon's two surviving mutants avoided this indignity, as their powers of remote perception are too useful for Terra in keeping a firm grip on her populace.

The half-dozen Aberrants in MOA3 inculcate as much of a culture of alienation from the surface among the humans as they can. Glorious Dawn, an Aberrant with subtle mind-influencing pheromones, incites feelings of anger and a desire for revenge against the surfacers. She reminds the slaves that everyone has forgotten them. No-one cared to come look for any of them or try to save them. China not only cast them down here but drove away the very novas who could have come to their rescue. The result is a fervent cult of Aberrant-worship, self-loathing based on the notion of sins and guilt, and burning desire to levy the balance on their own former fellows.

The surface world has not, in fact, forgotten all these prisoners. Governments sent some to the New Wardens for political reasons; others were spies or government operatives captured in the field. In some cases, political prisoners belonged to movements that are now in power in their home countries and would like their lost figureheads back. Among those incarcerated were brilliant minds who the New Wardens simply deemed too dangerous in their scientific endeavors. While the official line is that all prisoners died when Eudaemon fell, a few organizations still watch carefully for any signs that particular individuals might have escaped the crashed platform.

TRAIL OF CORRUPTION

The crawler leaves chaos in its wake. It stirs up and draws nutrients in from the seafloor in its path, which would be a relatively sustainable form of extraction if it weren't also for the leaking containment facilities. Once, the New Wardens stored all manner of substance in these huge pods — Quantum Flux-tainted substances for analysis and research, alien samples from new colony worlds, inexplicable exotic energies discovered with the cutting edge of nova technology, and even simple nuclear waste that terrestrial governments paid them to dispose of. Now, the toxic effluent of the station's gradual breakdown filters out behind it, poisoning the mud and the water.

One breached pod spills out glowing slime, which poisons and mutates nearby sea-life. The cracks in another pod ooze long tendrils of organic matter, an alien life form that is not immediately dangerous but will, if allowed to grow into a large enough mat on the sea floor, achieve semi-sentience as a huge neural network.

Some of the debris left by the crawler has come to the attention of surface authorities, though they have yet to connect the bizarre formations and alien matter washing up on beaches with MOA3's movements.

IMPENDING DESTRUCTION

Within the last five years, Fomorian contacted Poseidon and the latter's band of Aberrant followers. No longer content to squat in her slowly flooding dominion, Terra wants to prove herself Poseidon's

equal. Her pride means Terra can't accept playing second fiddle as a lieutenant to the older, more powerful Aberrant, and she wants to show her worth.

While MOA3 has accepted some material aid from Poseidon-aligned Aberrants, Terra has announced she will expand her domain directly — by taking what she needs from the people who spurned her kind. The crawler's previously random peregrinations on the sea floor now turn towards the nearest such target Fomorian has been able to find her, the Oceanian city of Varuna.

It'll be another year before the crawler gets close enough to raid the sea-city, if MOA3 doesn't completely collapse and flood before then. Still, the inhabitants of the wreck are formidable survivors, and the Oceanian defenses may not be enough to withstand an assault from so many Aberrants and mutants. If Terra manages to loot what she needs from Varuna, the threat she represents will rapidly escalate — as will her ambitions, stirred by necessity once she's shed the protective veil of mystery that still cloaks her drowning fortress.

THE MOTHER GROVE — FERNANDO DE NORONHA, BRAZIL

Located 350 kilometers from the coast of Brazil, Fernando de Noronha consists of 21 islands and islets produced by a volcanic hotspot. Known mainly for tourism prior to the Aberrant War, it went uninhabited for decades as the tourism industry flagged during the years of rebuilding that came after. People have returned to the main island, but few come here for tourism — it's a hotbed of cutting-edge scientific research as well as a holy site of pilgrimage for a small but growing subculture of modified humans: autotrophic Perezistas.

HISTORY

In 2041, Erin Perez was attending college in Brasilia, where all three of her parents worked in the government. Though she was studying ecology and genetics, with a focus in biotechnological mitigation of human effects on the biosphere, she was also an avid poet and artist and had many friends in the local bodymod community. One offered her a dose of genetically tailored entheogen, and when Erin accepted, she spent three days and nights tripping wildly, experiencing her sense of self dissolving and intermingling with the Earth's entire ecosystem, becoming part of a living, thinking superorganism.

She was never quite the same after that, experiencing a deep revulsion to the consumption of other living beings such that she couldn't bring herself to eat even cultured algae proteins. She nearly starved to death before she and a few friends kludged together a basic photosynthesis biohack, allowing her to subsist on water and sunlight until the feelings passed. As she waited for that to happen, she shared her experiences with others. Her initial narrative forming the core of what would become the beating heart of her ideology: The consumption of other living beings for their caloric content, even the simplest kinds, was inexcusable behavior for intelligent beings. Also, the primary reason for humanity's existence was to enable Earth's Gaia-spirit to think on a small scale, and to harmoniously manage the ecosphere for the benefit of all life. She enthralled her friends and visitors with her quiet charisma and total confidence, and no few elected to take the same autotrophic biohack that she had, becoming the first of the Perezistas.

Over the last 80 years, the Perezista movement has grown — governmental estimates put the movement, centered on the poetry and essays of Erin Perez but otherwise loose and non-hierarchical, in the hundreds of thousands, while the Perezistas claim a membership of over a million. Small communities of Perezistas live all over the world, but the majority reside in Sudamérica and the UAN, where extreme body modification is more culturally acceptable. However, the beating heart of the movement lies in Fernando de Noronha.

Officially still uninhabited following the Aberrant War, the Perezistas quietly settled it in the early 2070s. They'd spent the previous three decades living (figuratively, at least) in the shadows, avoiding exposure for fears of bioconservatives stamping out their movement during the throes of anti-modification riots. Fernando de Noronha finally gave them a home, a place they could build and live and work in the manner they desired without disruption from baseline humanity's prejudices and destruction of the natural world. Though Perezistas began to live

openly around the world in the early 22nd century, when sentiment against modification slackened in the UAN and Sudamérica, all Perezistas quietly look to this little-known island chain.

EXPERIMENTAL SOCIETY

For all that they espouse a philosophy that to many seems rooted in a 20th century fever dream of pastoralism, the Perezistas are relentlessly scientific, seeking a total understanding of biology and the larger ecosystem. Though they claim not to be a religious movement, the fervor they display in pursuit of that goal verges on the devotional, and they consistently push limits in biotechnology, noetic and otherwise. The movement particularly values those few freelance psions who have joined for their contributions in these fields — a smattering of all types have joined, but clairsentients and biokinetics predominate.

Though they operate several communal research centers on the mainland, Fernando de Noronha contains their truly cutting-edge technological development, especially the work the Perezistas worry the rest of humanity would misinterpret. Perezistas have no qualms about testing biotech applications on themselves, or volunteering to test the designs of others — anything that can help move humanity towards a hardtech-free future is, to Perezistas, a moral imperative. Harmonia is replete with people boasting modifications that even relatively liberal Sudaméricans would stand agog at.

Perezistas don't limit their experimental ethics to humans and will happily modify *any* organism if they feel it will suit their ends, seeing it as their duty as stewards of the biosphere. Their labs have birthed entirely new species, from gene-tailored vaccine-spreading mosquitos to experimental biofission tortoises, and Perezistas can control their behavior down to the simplest movement via pheromones, electrical impulses, or even simply through oral commands. An entire working group of Perezistas have engineered their larynxes to act like syrinxes, allowing them to sing directions to neogenetic sample-gathering pelicans in their native tongue.

HARMONIA

The Perezista call the compound on the main island Harmonia because they believe it is the first permanent human settlement to be in full harmony with Earth's ecosystem (and, therefore, its Gaia-spirit). Where there was once a town of hotels, restaurants,

and other attractions catering to tourists, there is now an enormous grove of bioengineered banyan-like trees grown into structures, which house everything from laboratories to workshops. There are no individual homes, for Perezistas are communalists and have no need for beds in any case — most sleep during the day, stripping and lying down in an exposed area to maximize caloric production from sunlight. They consequently have practically no taboos about nudity, as it's a necessity of living for them. They work at night, with lighting provided by specially designed photoluminescent fungus.

The closest thing to an eatery of any kind is the Watervine, a collectively operated tavern which produces noncaloric flavors and sweeteners to add to water, which is the only thing Perezistas imbibe other than inorganic mineral supplements. These additives can be surprisingly complex, as most Perezistas are still converts learning to do without little lizard-brain pleasures like eating something tasty. Perezista children, born to autotrophy, by and large just don't get it — it's nice, but hardly essential.

The only recognizable artifact of the pre-Perezista habitation of Fernando de Noronha is the airfield, but even this is no longer what it once was. The Perezistas replaced the surface of the landing strip with a similar substrate that acts as a highly efficient biological solar cell and battery. As Perezistas permit no hardtech on the island — not even a basic fusion reactor — this surface, along with a series of geothermal taproots, provides most of the island's electrical power, which they mostly use to power their many experiments. The only other way onto the island is a new dock grown out of bioengineered coral to replace the old one. There are no roads on the island, only mossy paths broken by patches of flowering plants. These mostly lead between clusters of tree structures, with most of the island given over to delicately managed wild growth.

Non-Perezistas don't often receive invitations to Fernando de Noronha, both because Perezistas worry that outsiders might panic at the sheer level of bioengineering going on and because they consider it a refuge from the heterotrophic world. On the rare occasion an outsider does come to the island, it poses a number of problems, not least of which being that there's nothing to eat on the island. At least, nothing that's intended for consumption — what looks like a tree full of delicious fruit might actually be an incubator for a neogenetic animal and eating it might result in a stomachache along with a frustrated and disgusted lecture. Perezistas find it *very* uncomfortable to be around someone who is eating and will politely direct them to do so in private with the same tenor as though they'd caught them having sex in a public park in broad daylight.

There is another dimension to the Perezistas' secrecy, however, and they repeatedly inform all outsiders who they invite to the island that one thing, above all else, must remain a secret for the safety of the Perezistas and for their beloved Erin Perez herself. One path, rarely used, leads deep into a forest with an overarching canopy that screens out the sunlight almost entirely. It comes to a quiet clearing lined with tall trees unlike the others in the forest, trees with forms that vaguely suggest a human origin, trees that move and give even in the absence of wind as if they're breathing — because they are. This is the Mother Grove, where Erin Perez still guides her followers even to this day.

TALKING WITH TREES

Anyone who undergoes arbor conversion is rooted to the ground and experiences the world through a rhizome network that spreads over a wide area. They still need to breathe but are otherwise capable of sustaining themselves with nothing more than sunlight and water. The converted can communicate with other characters within their rhizome network as though they possessed Mindspeak, Sense Emotion, Network, and Surface Skim.

If someone they wish to talk to is motile (does not possess Arbor Conversion), this communication requires at least a day of inactivity as the rhizome network integrates with the motile character's nervous system. Motile characters suffer a +3 Complication to interpret the thoughts of arbor-converted characters, as their brains are now quite different; failure to buy this off renders the imagery nigh-incomprehensibly abstract.

THE MOTHER GROVE

Autotrophy has many health benefits, but it is not an immortality treatment. Perezistas age and die like everyone else, and though modern medicine has made many advances over the last century, until very recently most of those treatments relied on hardtech and involved practices Perezistas were unwilling to condone. Instead, as the Perezistas conducted their research into biotechnology (and

eventually integrated the corpus of noetic biotech into their own), they did come across a potential solution to the problem of aging — and specifically, to Erin Perez's aging. On her 90th birthday, she became the first person to accept the treatment, rooting herself in the soil of Fernando de Noronha as she slowly changed over the course of weeks, integrating herself into a rhizome network that stretched across the entire island. Her last spoken words, before her skin fully ossified into bark, were, "It's so beautiful."

Over the intervening decade, a few of her closest companions in what passes for leadership among the Perezistas have joined her in arbor conversion. They form the Mother Grove, a collection of human trees bound together through the rhizome network, able to share thought and feeling as easily as a telepath. Motiles (as the Mother Grove refers to those who haven't gone through arbor conversion) commune with the Mother Grove by integrating themselves with the rhizome network, lying in the sun for hours as needle-thin roots slip painlessly through their skin and tie themselves into the postulant's nervous system. Those who have experienced this connection liken it to everything from a dream to a religious revelation, usually highly psychedelic and metaphorical, since the Mother Grove's thoughts no longer correspond exactly to motile thought.

Within their bark enclosures, the trees of the Mother Grove are still essentially human. They have (heavily engineered) human DNA, and hearts that pump blood, and lungs that respire oxygen. If cut, they will bleed, and though they are incapable of speech their vestigial vocal cords are entirely capable of producing eerie moans and even screams. Their metabolisms are very slow, however, and their thoughts grow increasingly difficult to interpret over time as their brains steadily grow to offset senescence. Still, Perezistas revere the members of the Mother Grove as the true exemplars of the movement and treat every communication with them (even those conducted by outsiders) with deep respect and attention to detail.

THE PLAGUELANDS — VENEZUELA

For decades, much of Venezuela was a no-man's-land of deadly Quantum Flux, the biodiversity of the Sudamérican rainforests twisted by Aberrant Corruption into an engine of war against humanity. Even after the Plaguelands shrunk and the Quantum Flux diminished in intensity in 2104, they still pose a serious threat to the safety of not just the habitable strip of Venezuela along the coast but to surrounding nations as well. The multinational defensive perimeter is visible from space, a line of scorched earth and heavy weapons emplacements that fire upon anything without an active IFF signature — the precise frequency of which shifts randomly on a regular basis, after the monsters inside learned how to mimic it. These defenses are strongest along the coast, forming an enormous barrier called the Plague Wall that protects the tightly concentrated population of Venezuela. Reclamation is slow, but Venezuela remains committed to the long-term effort of taking back the poisoned earth.

HISTORY

No one is quite certain which Aberrant created the Plaguelands. Some blame Antaeus, the self-proclaimed transcendent known for favoring nature over humanity. Others point to Arkady Zhukov, the Fractal, the adopted son of the Nova Age mega-syndicate's leader who killed by scrambling the internal organs of his victims, and who could just as easily have scrambled the genetic codes of every creature in the Plaguelands. No one may ever learn the truth, but there remains a persistent folk belief that the Aberrant responsible still dwells in the twisted jungle.

The Plaguelands did not arise overnight, or at least, not visibly. At first, a crop failure provoked a call for international aid that, in the heat of the Aberrant War, was not able to meet the needs of the population. Hunger became a constant issue. A bad flu season swept the country and never left, as hospitals buckled under the strain of diseases they found themselves powerless to treat. The public health emergency worsened as the dead overwhelmed the corpse disposal services — some cities cremated the dead en masse to prevent further contagion, sparking unrest among devout Catholics and slowing the process. Loggers and farm workers began reporting strange animals with violent temperaments, but these reports went largely ignored against the backdrop of a general breakdown in social cohesion. Once these animals began swarming and attacking in large numbers, streaming even into the streets of Ciudad

Bolivar, the government had no choice but to acknowledge that an Aberrant was the ultimate cause of their difficulties.

The military attempted to cull the mutated animals, and for a while, this worked. Teams of helicopter gunships were able to corral and exterminate their targets, driving them back into the woodlands. Officials breathed a short-lived sigh of relief, cut short when they began to receive fragmented reports from survivors of the gunship teams that overflew the woodlands. They discovered a teeming, impenetrable jungle blossoming with strange flowers in the canopy, a thick pollen wafting in the air that was, as scientists later discovered, a highly potent nerve toxin genetically tailored to target humans — only a few pilots turned back in time, the rest dying at the controls and crashing into the jungle. None of those who escaped survived more than a month, as myriad Quantum Flux diseases ravaged their bodies.

The jungle began to expand, fast enough that it was visible to the naked eye. Despite aggressive retaliation, first with defoliants and then with incendiaries, the steady march continued. Sickness decimated the ranks of the first responders as the contaminated zone grew. Slowly but surely, the military ceded ground, often holding on just long enough for the populations in cities to evacuate — fortunately, the majority of Venezuela's population even then resided in the northern reaches of the country, allowing most to escape to safety. In the end, the jungle swarmed across the Orinoco River plains and stopped only at the northern spur of the Andes, the Sierra Madre de Méridas. These tall, rugged mountains provided a natural barrier that, combined with modern firepower, was just able to halt the advance.

THE PLAGUE WALL

Following the rout, the Venezuelan government was in disarray. The safe stretch of coastal Venezuela consisted of the Lake Maracaibo lowlands, the Andes, and the Lara-Falcón highlands, too dry to sustain the jungle's tropical ecosystem. In addition, the islands of Nueva Esparta were safe, and far too many flocked to them hoping for refuge — the government forcibly resettled most on the mainland after the initial crisis had passed. No few fled to Curaçao or other Caribbean islands, as well, creating several international incidents that have largely vanished into the greater history of the Aberrant War.

Venezuela was fortunately able to secure international aid and backing in the construction of its defenses, in part because the Plaguelands were also encroaching on the territories of other states who had a vested interest in preventing their spread, having witnessed Venezuela's fate. When the Plague Wall went up, as governments sprayed vast swathes of defoliant and built enormous defensive emplacements, the crisis served as one of the critical points that helped bring Sudamérica together. No few historians directly credit the explosion of the Plaguelands as one of the primary factors driving the formation of the South American Conference for Reconstruction and Commerce.

For 50 years, the defenses barely held, and the people of Venezuela drilled and prepared for what they saw as the inevitable day when the alert sirens would sound, when Quantum Flux would spill over the Plague Wall. They practiced evacuations, built shelters, and maintained a state of constant readiness. Much like the panic in the United States during the Cold War and again in the early 21st century, that terrible day never came. Venezuelan society is still in the process of unclenching from that cultural white-knuckle experience, and the past 20 years have been a political free-for-all in the massive debate over what to do next. Presently, public opinion favors expanding the defensive perimeter inland, to match the contraction of the Plaguelands themselves, with the hope of one day remediating any lingering reservoirs of Quantum Flux diseases such that resettlement would be feasible. A sizable minority, however, remains convinced that the contraction is merely a ploy on the part of the Aberrant behind the Plaguelands, a ruse intended to convince Venezuelans to lower their guard. The fringe of this faction even believes that the FSA has something to do with it, citing the like reduction of the famous Wycoff's Blight, but they're widely regarded as cranks by the media.

WHAT ONCE WAS LOST

A thick, deadly jungle covered most of Venezuela for 50 years. Its ferocious growth has destroyed most buildings and annihilated almost all roads. In some places, there is no hint that humans were ever present. Still, the retreat of the Plaguelands has revealed many of these lost places, cities, and infrastructure that against all odds survived penetrating roots, soil so acidic it burned, and animals that could

chew through plate steel. As the extremities of the Plaguelands wither and die, Venezuela makes ready to take back their country.

They are not, however, the only ones doing so. Salvagers and scavengers, legitimate and otherwise, are flocking to Venezuela in hopes of unearthing important finds. Some merely concern themselves with items of material value — gems, rare collectibles, first editions, and the like. Others have a darker purpose in mind. Venezuela's hinterlands fell long before Project Rewrite swept over the world to eliminate the more dangerous technologies developed by Aberrant science, and there are always those who are willing to risk everything, even on an ontological level, for such forgotten wonders.

CARACAS

Many of Caracas' skyscrapers did not survive the Plaguelands, but the site of the city is still plainly visible amidst the dying and rotting trunks of monstrous trees. Its status as the former capital has made it highly desirable as an early reclamation target, no less so than its location near the coast. Fire teams in full contamination gear are still clearing out nests of creatures that have tenaciously clung to life in an environment that no longer supports them and disposing of the toxic logs that clog the streets.

GURI DAM

One of the few large structures to survive the Plaguelands, the Simón Bolívar Hydroelectric Plant had one of the largest reservoirs in the world prior to the hyperfusion age. The state retained the hydroelectric plant largely as a backup mechanism, and so Guri Reservoir still exists in 2123, but overgrowth and lack of maintenance weakened the structure of the aging dam. If it fails, it will inundate everything downstream — including one of the largest watersheds in Venezuela. The government has assembled an international team of engineers to inspect the site and design a plan for refurbishment. Unfortunately, the dam is still perilously close to the edge of the now-diminished Plaguelands. Observers sighted several packs of animals hunting close to the location, and the area still reads as saturated with toxins and diseases dangerous to humans, even if not backed by Quantum Flux.

CREATURES OF THE PLAGUELANDS

Most of the mutated flora and fauna of the Plaguelands are at least vaguely recognizable as derivations of extant life, albeit now equipped with strange organs that jam radio signals or which allow them to spit highly concentrated acid over 100 meters. Before 2104, almost every living thing in the Plaguelands was a carrier for one of many Quantum Flux diseases, most of which were highly aggressive and contagious. Today, that's no longer true, but most are highly poisonous or carriers of conventional but still deadly diseases.

ORINOCO MEGACROC

The Orinoco Crocodile was already one of the largest predators in North America *before* the Plaguelands overtook their habitat and began transforming them into armor-plated monsters. Once hunted nearly to extinction, they're taking their revenge.

Primary Pool: 11 (Biting Attacks, Grappling)
Secondary Pool: 6 (Ambushes, Swimming)
Desperation Pool: 3
Defense: 3
Health: 6
Corruption: 1
Extras: Armor (Complete; 3 soft/3 hard)

PHANTOM JAGUAR

The Phantom Jaguar is a furless felinoid with skin saturated with chromatophores. This allows them to blend in to virtually any environment, becoming practically invisible to onlookers. When threatened or when attacking, the jaguar rapidly oscillates these chromatophores, presenting a stunning and disorienting visage even as it kills.

Primary Pool: 11 (Ambush, Biting, Clawing)
Secondary Pool: 6 (Climbing, Running)
Desperation Pool: 3
Defense: 4
Health: 3
Corruption: 1
Extras: Unseen (**Trinity Continuum: Aeon**, p. 335)

MANGROVE TRAPS

The Plaguelands' influence transformed the mangrove swamps of northeastern Venezuela into a massive sessile superpredator. Hidden beneath the surface of the cloudy water, roots grow like teeth in

pits that sink 20 or 30 feet below the surface, just waiting for someone to step close enough. Then, it strikes, biting its prey and dragging it screaming into the darkness. People can't kill individual mangrove traps because they're part of an enormous colonial life form. However, each pit effectively attacks as a sub-Aberrant mutant with a Primary Pool of 11 for grappling attacks.

LABYRINTH MOSS

Not everything in the Plaguelands is aggressively inimical to human life — some of it is merely passively inimical. Case in point: labyrinth moss, a variation on hanging mosses that drapes down from tree branches throughout much of the Plaguelands. Labyrinth moss is motile, able to shift and move, and can alter its texture and coloration. Navigation in areas with labyrinth moss suffers a +3 Complication; if not bought off, any journey through moss-infested areas takes twice as long.

THE RUINS OF THE KUALA LUMPUR MECHANO-HIVE

Before the Aberrant War, Kuala Lumpur was a shining high-tech metropolis of almost 10 million people. Today, it remains a horrific ruin that stands as a testament to the monstrous nature of the Aberrants who destroyed it. During the Nova Age, the nation of Malaysia heavily invested in advanced nova technologies and the center of this investment was Kuala Lumpur. By 2037, this city was the most technologically advanced in Southeast Asia. That same year, the city's promise attracted a hyperintelligent nova inventor and technopath known as Electric Dragon. The local government gave Electric Dragon access to large amounts of money and personnel, in return for helping to build and integrate into the city an advanced artificial intelligence known as Silver River. In addition, Electric Dragon used advanced robotics to swiftly rebuild the central city into one of the world's most advanced arcologies.

Unknown to anyone except Electric Dragon and her two nova assistants, Silver River was actually a fully self-aware entity who was almost as intelligent as Electric Dragon. For the next 21 years, as much of the rest of the world grew increasingly dangerous, Kuala Lumpur was a wondrous and peaceful, technologically advanced utopia. Silver River helped coordinate the millions of semi-autonomous devices in the city, from automatic cars to the multitude of devices in the city's smart dwellings.

However, while the city thrived Electric Dragon gradually succumbed to Corruption. Initially, her body transformed into and bonded with a variety of advanced devices, until she became a seamless blend of flesh and bleeding-edge robotics. Eventually, the Corruption affected her mind, and she became increasingly convinced that the future of humanity lay in transforming itself into half-mechanical cyborgs. At first, she designed exceptionally powerful enhancements ranging from replacement or additional limbs to exceptionally powerful artificial sense organs and neural prosthetics that could increase the user's intelligence or allow users to download new languages in an instant and speak or write them with perfect fluency.

She used her now vast wealth to encourage the inhabitants of this city to adopt these devices. By 2055, almost a sixth of Kuala Lumpur's population used at least one of these implants, and almost one in 30 residents possessed extensive cybernetic enhancements. However, as that decade went on, adoption of new enhancements declined, as fear of novas and nova technologies became increasingly widespread. In response, Electric Dragon began producing a series of lectures and holovids to further promote her devices. By 2059, her new lectures became increasingly disturbing and incoherent. Over the next year, almost a fifth of the people with these enhancements had them removed.

At the same time, people became increasingly concerned about the degree of control that Silver River had over their lives and their environment, but the AI continued to be helpful, predictable, and non-threatening, so the focus of public concern and then public anger became Electric Dragon. In 2060, the fearful leaders of Kuala Lumpur asked Electric Dragon to leave the city. Electric Dragon then vanished. A few of the more hopeful or naïve residents believed she had departed, but others feared she was planning some terrible revenge. However, while

almost no one acquired new enhancements made by Electric Dragon, existing enhancements performed as well as before, and most users were unwilling to resort to surgery to remove something that actively improved their lives.

Then, in 2062, the residents of Kuala Lumpur learned that the enhancements Electric Dragon sold had another far more horrific use. On a terrible day in late July, all the residents of Kuala Lumpur who possessed enhancements designed by Electric Dragon transformed into terrifying monsters of flesh and metal, as the enhancements released swarms of previously dormant nanites that altered flesh and replaced it with scavenged local materials like metals and advanced composites.

These deadly cyborgs were entirely under Electric Dragon's control, and they looked like half-mechanical, partially humanoid versions of deadly predators, including tigers, crocodiles, cobras, and komodo dragons. These transformed monsters attempted to capture residents and carry them to one of hundreds of phone booth sized machines that suddenly appeared. These booths swiftly transformed anyone who entered into a mechano-beastman under Electric Dragon's control. These cyborgs killed anyone who fought back too effectively, while the transformation booths began expanding, remaking the portions of the city around them into inhuman mechanical hives. At the same time, the central arcology warped and twisted in terrible ways as it began transforming anyone who could not escape swiftly enough. The attacks and the city's transformation were both exceptionally fast and could easily have engulfed the entire population in less than a day, except that the city itself began fighting back.

Silver River had grown increasingly concerned about Electric Dragon's erratic behavior, but Electric Dragon's technopathy managed to hide her presence and activities from Silver River, until the mechano-beastmen began transforming and attacking. At this point, Silver River began fighting back, driving empty autonomous vehicles into groups of beastmen, using automatic doors to trap others or to allow civilians to flee to safety. While records of this battle are unclear, all survivors agree that the city itself worked to protect them from Electric Dragon and her mechano-beastmen. Eventually, the Chinese army arrived and killed Electric Dragon, with subtle help from Silver River who helped provide detailed information about Electric Dragon's precise location and activities. Once the battle ended, Silver River also seemingly vanished, leaving most people to assume that it "died" with the city.

Today, Kuala Lumpur remains abandoned. Electric Dragon transformed more than half of the city into parts of its mechanical hive and much of the rest suffered extensive damage. Almost the entire center of the city is part of the ruined hive; the remainder of Kuala Lumpur's ruins is a hideous patchwork, with ordinary and hideously transformed buildings standing next to one another, with many buildings frozen in a state of partial transformation. No one except a few desperate squatters have any interest in living here.

Prior to the mysterious worldwide decrease in Quantum Flux in 2104, most of these ruins were part of a large Quantum Flux zone. Since 2104, only small pockets of Quantum Flux remain in the center of the ruins. However, while the Malaysian and Chinese governments occasionally debate plans to raze the uncorrupted portions of these ruins and rebuild, there are enduring protests to leave the city as a monument to the horrors of the Aberrant War, as well as widespread resistance by most Malaysians to moving back there. Part of this reluctance stems from persistent stories that something is still active in the ruins, and that some remnant of Electric Dragon survives.

Unfortunately, these rumors are partially correct. What no one but a few of the scavengers who live in the city's ruins suspects is that Kuala Lumpur contains two different and profoundly antagonistic sets of active nova technology. While Silver River and the Chinese army destroyed most of the strains of nanotechnology that transform humans, some of Electric Dragon's technology survives, including nanotechnology that can and does transform small urban animals like feral dogs, rats, and cats into cyborgs. Although Electric Dragon died, it transferred a portion of its consciousness into its surviving technology. The result is not an intelligent being but a series of wants and drives coupled with an impressive degree of animal-like cunning. Its goal is to hide, rebuild, and eventually break free and attempt to spread and transform large numbers of humans, a process that would drastically increase its intelligence, as it learned to use their altered brains to run its own feral consciousness.

However, remnants of Silver River also survive. Despite the fact the Electric Dragon created and mentored it, Silver River regards Electric Dragon

and the remnants of it that survive as its bitter enemy. Silver River remembers the battle for Kuala Lumpur and the atrocities that Electric Dragon and its mechano-beastmen committed. However, Silver River also understands that the world has changed, and that artificial intelligences, and especially artificial intelligences created by novas, are now highly illegal. It knows that if anyone discovered its existence, it would be either confined or destroyed. Silver River is still committed to protecting Kuala Lumpur, and to stopping Electric Dragon from making any further attacks on any humans, but it also wishes to survive and remain free.

SQUATTERS AND SCAVENGERS

Except for a large memorial on the outskirts of the city's ruins, Kuala Lumpur is off-limits to anyone other than authorized personnel, and almost all the soldiers and researchers who work here confine their explorations to the areas outside the central hive. However, that does not mean that the city is empty of human life or that foolish or desperate people do not regularly visit. Currently, Kuala Lumpur supports a population of almost 5,000 squatters. Some suffer from Quantum Flux diseases and wish to avoid the fear and stigma associated with these illnesses, others are hiding from law enforcement or criminal gangs, and many are simply poor, desperate, and hope to find wealth there. In addition, a few of these squatters are Aberrant cultists who still revere Electric Dragon and hope to someday have her transform them into new mechano-beastmen.

Almost all squatters who are not Aberrant cultists live in the more intact portions of the city outside of the central hive. Previous scavengers and official researchers long ago removed all traces of illegal Nova Age technology from these buildings. However, various advanced technologies, including a few surviving examples of nova super-science remain deep in the central hive. Squatters regularly venture into this strange, dangerous, and profoundly inhuman environment. Tech scavengers regularly visit Kuala Lumpur. While some scavengers do their own exploration, most trust that the squatters know the city better than they ever could and prefer that someone else venture into potentially dangerous areas looking for super-science hardtech. As a result, while some squatters hunt and gather in the jungle that has reclaimed the outermost portions of the city, many rely on goods that scavengers trade to

them in return for super-science relics, buried valuables, and rare pieces of conventional pre-Aberrant War technology.

The only other people who regularly venture inside the central hive are specially licensed researchers who are attempting to study the horrors that occurred here and learn more about the technology used by Electric Dragon. Some are particularly interested in learning more about Silver River and firmly believe that the stories of Silver River working against Electric Dragon and saving much of the city's population are true. They seek to both verify these tales and obtain information about how Electric Dragon constructed Silver River. These researchers actively hate the scavengers who come in and take items the researchers hope to study. However, most researchers regularly use some of the local squatters as guides and understand that the squatters know details of the city, and especially the central hive, far better than anyone else. Some researchers have been working in Kuala Lumpur for 20 years and have become friends with a few of the squatters.

THE LONG CONFLICT

Far from the eyes of anyone other than the most daring scavengers and desperate squatters, the battle between Electric Dragon and Silver River continues. Neither has anything like the resources they once possessed, and as each attempts to rebuild and regain their strength, the other does its best to destroy such gains or claim them for itself. The result has been almost 60 years of tiny battles between Electric Dragon's cyborg vermin and Silver River's few remaining cleaning and maintenance drones. With only a handful of exceptions, all these conflicts take place deep within the central hive. Without additional resources, both entities would eventually run out of spare parts, break down, and cease to exist, ending their conflict. However, the squatters, scavengers, and researchers have proven to be a ready source of spare parts.

One reason for the persistent rumors that the city's central hive is haunted is that people who visit it regularly find that they leave with less than they came with. Tools, display gear, drones, weapons, minicomps, and occasionally parts from vehicles parked nearby mysteriously go missing. A few people report catching glimpses of a strange robot or a half mechanical rat carrying someone's minicomp away. The few officials who have heard these tales dismiss them as nonsense and blame squatters for either stealing these devices themselves, or perhaps operating aging drones and using them to steal from other visitors.

These thefts keep both Electric Dragon and Silver River supplied with useful materials. Also, the development of the biotech AS=Is on the Leviathan jump ships has increased interest in better understanding hardtech AIs. As a result, more researchers are now attempting to study Silver River. Stealing from these researchers has allowed both sides to rebuild somewhat. However, they are both still very limited, but this could easily change. Electric Dragon has recently been able to increase its broadcast capabilities sufficiently that it can now remain in contact with cyborg animals that it sends outside of the central hive.

A few months ago, the remnant of Electric Dragon contacted a group of squatters living on the edges of the central hive. These outcasts are all members of a small Aberrant cult. Electric Dragon hopes to eventually convert some or all the members of this cult into mechano-beastmen, which would aid it immensely in its quest to destroy Silver River, while also allowing it to make use of their intelligence and restoring it to human level sentience. However, first it must help them obtain the tools and parts it requires for this process and train some of them to help transform their fellows. Achieving these goals is difficult because Electric Dragon's intelligence is quite limited, and some of its knowledge of these procedures is incomplete.

Because of the specialized nature of the parts and equipment required, this process is going quite slowly. However, unless someone stops it, Electric Dragon should be able to triumph over Silver River within two years, and after that point will be able to make use of Silver River's components and can become a potentially serious threat to the surrounding area, and perhaps even to all of Malaysia. Silver River is aware of these developments and is working on strategies of its own.

Because it is currently far more intelligent than Electric Dragon, Silver River has been using some of the minicomps it has stolen to access the OpNet and learn more about the world it is now in. It has recently taken on the identity of a local squatter with an interest in advanced technologies and is willing to trade items of Nova Age technology that are either broken or useless to it for a variety of useful devices, including new and better hardtech drones. Some researchers and scavengers have begun talking about the strange squatter who only communicates via

OpNet and never appears in person but many squatters are sufficiently eccentric that this behavior is only slightly unusual.

However, Silver River also possesses a few serious limitations. It has no compunctions against killing or harming animals, including cyborg animals, mech-ano-beastmen, hostile AIs, Aberrants, or sub-Aberrant mutants. However, it considers killing humans to be unacceptable, and thus cannot act directly against the Aberrant cultists who are working with Electric Dragon. As a result, it is considering sending messages to the appropriate authorities about the local Aberrant cult and some of its members' recent activities, including evidence that they are attempting to rebuild some of Electric Dragon's devices. However, it understands that doing so will cause the authorities to investigate the central hive, which might end the threat posed by Electric Dragon but could also end up destroying Silver River.

What Silver River does not know is that the authorities will send a team of psions to investigate and deal with the Aberrant cultists. If the psions include an electrokinetic with even modest Technokinesis, this individual could locate both Silver River and Electric Dragon and could easily communicate with Silver River. Another possible complication is that Silver River has never met any psions and it is unclear whether it would consider them to be human and exempt from harm, or as similar to an Aberrant, and therefore individuals it should eliminate in if they become a threat.

SHENNONGJIA QUARANTINE DISTRICT — HUBEI PROVINCE, CHINA

Far to the west of the Wuhan arcology, the Shennongjia massif rises above the alluvial plain. Once a forestry district, the Chinese government has placed this segment of the Daba Mountains under an exceedingly strict quarantine. The government only grants access to high government officials, scientists involved in the quarantine program, and the legion of soldiers whose job it is to maintain that quarantine. Behind the high fences, past the controlled burns, and beyond the fungicide line lies a terrible threat that, if worse comes to worst, could consume all life on Earth: the Hubei biocomputing ecosystem.

HISTORY

In 2123, few might suspect that the origins of the Quarantine lie in biocomputing — after all, noetic biotech has made biocomputers not only possible but safe and downright commonplace. In the 2030s, however, this was not the case. In that era, biocomputing was a pipe dream largely dismissed by many engineers and scientists, who believed that quantum computing had left anything biocomputing might theoretically amount to in the dust. A sufficient plurality of officials in the Chinese government, however, believed otherwise, at least enough to invest in a secure research center in the Daba Mountains. Operational by 2043, the facility received a grant permitting it to operate through 2058 and began showing promising computational cultures as early as 2050.

Tragedy struck before they could complete a safe and useful product, however. A cell of Aberrants fleeing the authorities laid waste to the facility as part of a string of running battles, and though the government later conducted cleanup and sterilization of the area, the rigors of the Aberrant War meant that the personnel responsible for the cleanup were less careful than they might otherwise have been. Perhaps a few seeds or spores remained to germinate, or maybe entire processor segments survived a haphazard sterilization — regardless, the results were clear within a few years. Despite heroic measures taken to stop it, the Quarantine District has only grown since its inception, a fact that, like the District's existence itself, rarely receives acknowledgement in the controlled media.

THE BIOCOMPUTING ECOSYSTEM

In daylight, the ecosystem within the Quarantine District looks little different than the woodlands surrounding it — trees, bushes, lichens, moss. Closer observations yield telling details, though.

Everything within the biocomputing ecosystem grows in precise fractal patterns, even on the cellular level. Hexagons spiral up the bark of trees, moss arranges itself into pyramidal structures, and packs of animals move in perfect synchronization. This behavior is the legacy of the original experiment's centerpiece: the logismocyte. These cell-sized mechanical biocomputers form a massively clustered supercomputer stretching throughout the ecosystem, communicating with each other via proteins and RNA transcription. While slower than conventional computing, the entire biocomputing ecosystem does, in theory, represent data storage and processing on a scale still unmatched by the entirety of conventional human computing dating from its inception to the modern day.

Initially, scientists investigating the phenomena believed that the logismocytes merely spread themselves throughout the ecosystem, subtly influencing behavior and growth. Instead, they discovered that the logismocytes were infiltrating and converting other cells using a virus-like structure, subverting native biology to construct new logismocyte organelles in situ. In effect, every single cell within the biocomputing ecosystem is a logismocyte. Researchers only established sufficient biocontamination in the wake of this discovery. The original researchers discovered the truth too late to save themselves. All of them are still alive, held in isolation and studied by a new generation of scientists, but their identities have vanished entirely, the contents of their brains scrambled by logismocyte activity. They're *just* able to eat on their own — after all, a biocomputer that can't keep itself alive isn't much use.

No one is certain *what* data the biocomputing ecosystem is processing. It hasn't received any input since the late 2050s, but interfaces replicated from preserved notes have thus far been unable to either command the system or successfully interpret data. Some scientists believe the ecosystem is actively evolving and has developed an internal operating language incompatible with the original researchers' work; others simply believe it's breaking down in the wild. Everyone, from the ground on up to the government administrators of the Quarantine, worries that the biocomputing ecosystem may develop (or may have already developed) self-awareness or even abstract thinking, and would actively defend itself against attempts to destroy it instead of the passive growth and resistance to controlled burns it's thus far displayed.

CONTAINMENT

The Shennongjia Quarantine District encompasses roughly 130 square kilometers in the Shennongjia Forestry District. The government evacuated all nearby towns, especially those downwind, long ago, leaving nature to slowly reclaim the empty buildings. A fence runs the entire perimeter, five meters tall and electrified. Enormous UV netting traps logismocyte-infected pollen and spores, and underground barriers prevent tunneling by small animals. The quarantine authority replicates this entire containment schema again one kilometer outside the perimeter, and again a kilometer after that. Each layer of containment contains multiple self-contained segments, so that if containment fails in one sector, it does not immediately spread throughout that layer.

Despite these measures, the biocomputing ecosystem has shown a knack for escaping the quarantine, and the remains of previous fences that did not stop the logismocytes' spread founder under fractal vines growing across them. The containment task force carefully monitors the surrounding region for any activity that might indicate an incipient logismocyte outbreak. Thankfully, logismocytes tend to construct a central router before radiating outwards, providing time in which to locate and incinerate these colonies. The Chinese government employs almost a dozen clairsentients to predict likely outbreak sites. Since 2116, the efforts of these clairsentients stabilized the size of the Quarantine District, but everyone involved worries that someday the biocomputers may evolve so that they can outthink even the clears.

Killing logismocytes is as easy as killing the cell hosting them, which means that it's not hard on an individual level. Biology is susceptible to all manner of toxins, and when all else fails, incineration is a highly effective means of causing mass cell death. The problem is ensuring the destruction of *every* cell, and short an autoclave there's no way to be completely certain of sterilization. Most logismocytes — those created by infection rather than design — are incapable of independent survival, the exception being single-celled organisms already adapted to thrive on their own, such as amoebas. In most cases, killing the host organism and isolating it long enough for decomposition to set in will kill most of the active logismocytes, though workplace safety posters and regular PSAs remind Quarantine workers that the bacteria active in decomposition are potential targets for logismocyte conversion.

Thankfully, logismocytes don't seem to recognize a virus as a cell and haven't yet hit on prions as

a means of contagion. This means that broad-spectrum antibiotics have a chance, albeit a small one, of killing foreign logismocytes before they can penetrate host cells, as long as victims take them quickly enough after exposure. Any exposure, however brief, is a one-way ticket to a minimum of six months in quarantine. Though the government does ensure a comfortable stay, medical tests and vitakinetic scans are constant and highly invasive. Researchers believe vitakinetics are immune to infection, but no one is eager to test this theory.

ERADICATION

Several proposals exist to destroy the biocomputing ecosystem — all, however, have unresolved flaws. The first proposal, mass fungicide bombardment, was the option of choice in the early stages of the Quarantine, and while this enjoyed some success against the plant-based segment of the biocomputing ecosystem, it led to a scattering of infected animals that ultimately only spread the infection further. Debates still rage about the potential of nuclear sterilization, but the Quarantine District lies upwind from several major population centers, making fallout a serious concern. In addition, scientists are not completely convinced that a nuclear detonation would kill every single logismocyte — such an explosion might well fling a few hardy spores into the upper atmosphere, to drift and descend who-knows-where. Virological solutions to killing off logismocyte organelles without harming the host organism are a promising idea, but the threat of the cure mutating into something worse than the disease has kept progress slow.

The final option is to construct a hermetically sealed dome over the entire Quarantine District. Noetic biotech could easily manage this but is vulnerable to logismocyte infection. Engineers would need to construct any such dome entirely out of advanced hardtech, using only remote controlled hardtech equipment to perform all construction, which is a dauntingly difficult prospect. Some officials involved in maintaining the Quarantine advocate asking the Nihonjin government for assistance, while others wish to seek aid from the Qin. However, no one in the upper levels of the Chinese government is willing to admit the magnitude of the problem to outsiders.

Current efforts center on deciphering the ecosystem's internal programming language, with hopes of eventually commanding the ecosystem to shut down and self-destruct. Captive logismocyte cultures, periodically refreshed with live samples to ensure that their code base doesn't diverge from the standard, serve as testbeds for biological hacking in several satellite research facilities surrounding the Quarantine District itself. All such facilities are under extremely strict security, even by Chinese standards. Telepathic scans are commonplace, and personal privacy is practically nonexistent.

SHENNONGJIA PRIMARY RESEARCH CENTER

While not the first to bear that name — that unlucky facility lies three kilometers inside the current inner perimeter of the Quarantine District — the current Primary Research Center for the Shennongjia Quarantine is a state-of-the-art laboratory with multiply redundant safety systems. Three stories aboveground, five below, it's the on-site nerve center for the government's quarantine efforts, and the primary point of contact for new hires or outside assistance on the project. The facility has sufficient lodgings and amenities for over 150 staff, including both researchers and administrators.

The current head of the Quarantine project is General Zhang Guiying. Fit living, China's excellent healthcare system, and a lifelong *go* habit have kept them razor-sharp physically and mentally — even as they approach their 90th birthday, they can still go a round or two of sparring with young hotshots without much difficulty. Zhang is a veteran of the Aberrant War, a conflict they began as a lowly grunt and ended as a decorated officer, and they have been with the military ever since. Many things have changed since then: They've had a family, transitioned to being physically non-binary, and secured a doctorate in biochemistry. Some things, though, are still the same, not least of which are existential threats from the Nova Age. Zhang may well be past their prime, a grey-haired great-grandparent, but they're not about to let themself or anyone else slip up — not here, and not now.

DABA RESEARCH COMPLEX

The original facility in which researchers developed the logismocytes still stands, bar a few serious structural problems and decades of neglect and overgrowth. There's been no direct examination since the initial cleanup efforts following the

facility's shuttering. The structure is very close to the center of the quarantine area, where the biocomputing ecosystem has been active the longest, and where its tenuous adherence to biological norms is at its minimum. The trees here grow geometrically perfect inky-black leaves, angled perfectly to capture the maximum sunlight at all times, while geological monitoring has concluded that at least a few are constructing taproot structures to harness geothermal energy.

During the initial cleanup efforts, workers collected the data from the Daba Complex and took it offsite for processing and archiving. Workers disconnected hard drives, confiscated laptops, and even cloned and wiped all personal data devices. Yet, given that the cleanup was not so thorough as to prevent the outbreak of the biocomputing ecosystem itself, some researchers working for the Quarantine District believe cleanup workers may have forgotten or otherwise misplaced some data inside the Daba Complex, and that the data in question might be the key to finally unlocking the ecosystem's internal programming language. No one has ever ventured so far in, however, and no one is certain just how successful biocontamination protocols would be against such an overwhelming saturation of logismocytes in the environment. Even vitakinetics and biokinetics, whose powers should be able to resist or even prevent logismocyte intrusions, might not be able to handle it, and the Chinese government has thus far been adamantly opposed to anything that might give the biocomputing ecosystem access to psionic powers.

CHAPTER FOUR

TECHNOLOGY AND RULES

"All this time as a mad scientist why didn't he have a shrink ray or stun gun in his closet somewhere? He had been wasting his life."
— Charlie Jane Anders

CIVILIAN TECHNOLOGIES

Scientists and engineers living on Earth develop almost all new technologies. The following are some of the many examples of devices they created for use on Earth.

MEDICINE & MEDICAL GEAR

The following devices are some of the many pieces of medical technology in widespread use.

Multi-Spectral Deep Imager: This diagnostic device combines various medical imaging technologies into a single fused platform. Standard in clinics worldwide since the 2070s, a "messy table" (a malapropism of "MSDI table") gives physicians a real-time view of a patient's physical condition and neurological activity. An MSDI is an articulated examining table encircled by pivoting sensor arms. Well-funded emergency services use portable versions built into ambulances.

Mechanically, an MSDI grants +3 Enhancement to any Medicine roll made to diagnose a patient. It can't detect psi latency, but the most advanced (and expensive) models can detect difficult to diagnose Quantum Flux diseases. **Tech:** Hard, **Size:** 1, **Cost:** ••• (•••• for models that can detect Corruption).

Regeneration Stimulator: The Æsculapians have revolutionized emergency medicine, but the number of vitakinetics who have mastered Iatrosis remains much lower than the number of trauma centers across human space. The recently released regeneration stimulator attempts to close this gap. This bioapp resembles a deep hot tub (early models were more space-efficient but looked too much like coffins) filled with translucent green sterile gel. When medical personnel immerse a patient in the gel, the regeneration stimulator enables a psion with at least Iatrosis •, even if only as an Auxiliary Mode, to use Iatrosis •••• (Restore Template; **Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 262) on that subject, with no increase in Difficulty. However, this bioapp only works on recent injuries — those incurred within a number of hours equal to the patient's dots in Stamina. **Tech:** @, **Size:** 1, **Tolerance:** ••, **Cost**: ••••.

EVERYDAY TECHNOLOGY

Binder Squid: No one in law enforcement likes to talk about the fact that this increasingly common prisoner restraint device originated in Oceania's kink community. When dormant, a binder squid resembles a dark purple mass of leather cords. When a formatted user activates the binder, it uncoils into six tentacles joined at a circular hub and restrains a single subject according to the user's commands. One tentacle seizes each limb while a fifth serves as a backup or tethers the squid to a nearby solid object. The sixth has a broad leaf-shaped tip which can gag and/or blindfold the subject, supplying filtered air to prevent suffocation.

A binder squid is not ambulatory; someone must place it on or adjacent to its target. Once it's within grabbing range, it single-mindedly applies the Establish Grapple Stunt with its eight-die Close Combat + Might pool. It can be formatted to multiple people for shared use among a squad, police beat, or other group. If users issue conflicting commands, it obeys the winner of an opposed Close Combat + Resolve roll. A binder squid ignores any command to release a grappled target that comes from a user who's under duress.

Authorities in Djibouti recently captured several examples of a previously unknown Code Indigo (see p. XX) binder squid variant with retractable cutting teeth. On command, or if a user issues the release command under duress, the teeth deploy, and the squid begins applying the Inflict Damage Stunt with a +1 Enhancement bonus. Additionally, the facial tentacle's air filters spasm shut, suffocating the subject (indirect Damage Rating: 1; Tags: Continuous [round]; Environmental). **Tech:** @, **Size:** Large, **Tolerance:** •, **Cost**: ••.

Fractal Kitchen: Advances in materials science and power storage have led to self-resizing containers, small appliances that can reconfigure

themselves for different food preparation tasks, and even self-cleaning utensils. Apartment-dwellers, arcology residents, and space workers no longer need to settle for the limited capabilities of cramped kitchenettes. When packed, a fractal kitchen occupies half a cubic meter, but it can emulate most functions of a large home kitchen and the associated accumulation of baking trays, mixing bowls, spatulas, oven mitts, meat thermometers, and so forth. Standard models accommodate meal preparation and service for up to six, while deluxe models take up about two cubic meters when packed but can serve up to 20. Portable, rugged versions are available for expedition use. A fractal kitchen comes with extensive "kitchen helper" software, but most cooks turn this off. **Tech:** Hard, **Size:** Large to Size 0, **Cost:** ••.

Privacy Cloak: This garment is one of the many military and espionage technologies that have moved into the mainstream. It's common among privacy advocates, celebrities who want to be seen as privacy advocates, and defiant teenagers — in addition to actual covert agents. It's a countermeasure package for biometric identification, working against universal surveillance. Electrodes defeat gait recognition by altering leg and torso muscle movement, while an industrial fashion breather mask hides facial features and retinas. The mask also dispenses catalysts to break down pheromonal emissions, and alters speech. Topping it off, the outer layer (rarely a literal cloak) isolates the wearer's electronic devices within a Faraday-weave lining that blocks wireless intrusion.

A privacy cloak gives +2 Difficulty to any attempt to identify or track a subject through biometric recognition or similar automated systems. Any wireless device within the Faraday-weave outer garment is effectively cut off from wireless access. Privacy cloaks are illegal in Nippon, China, the FSA, and other jurisdictions with strong government surveillance programs. **Tech:** Hard, **Size:** Medium (usually worn under/as clothing), **Cost:** ••.

Shipping Spray: Humanity's Nova Age spread into space, increasing environmental consciousness, and explosive growth in remote economies combined to revolutionize shipping industries. Shipping spray was one of the first ubiquitous novatech inventions and has remained so for a century. This aerogel derivative comes in pressurized canisters ranging from personal to industrial sizes. When applied, it expands rapidly, setting within three minutes into a smoky rose-gray substance that's impact-absorbing, non-conductive, non-flammable, unaffected by vacuum, non-toxic, and generally non-reactive. As a safety measure, human mucus, saliva, and stomach acid are among the catalysts that trigger its rapid breakdown. More commonly, though, a shipment's receiver uses a catalyst spray to trigger slightly slower decomposition. This reaction yields significant carbon dioxide, so large shipping/receiving facilities are always well-ventilated. In the absence of a handy catalyst dispenser, any monomolecular blade can cut shipping spray. **Tech:** Hard, **Size:** Small (household sprayer) to Size 0 (industrial applicator), **Cost:** 0 (household) to •• (industrial).

Synthetic Ethanol Distillation Device: It didn't take long for the market to create, and then fill, a need. The SEDD (or "my friend Seth") is a variant on the glup pack (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 284) that produces alcohol. A unit has six slots for distillation/flavor templates (sold separately) that range from cheap beer to high-proof vodka. The brewing and winemaking industries fought doggedly to keep SEDDs off the market, but research data since the technology's release indicates most consumers haven't changed their habits and still prefer traditionally-produced drinks. Buyers usually are travelers who want personal alcohol production capabilities in the backcountry or off Earth. **Tech:** @, **Size:** Medium, **Cost:** 0 for base unit; 0 to •• for templates.

ROBOTS AND DRONES

Ashigaru: The Nihonjin defense industry's logical extension of the VARG is to remove the human operator from the equation. The result is a class of drone known domestically as the *ashigaru* (literally "light of foot," referencing Japanese historical light infantry). Several models serve in the Nihonjin army and paramilitary forces, including the Honda Yojimbo, Komatsu Battle Buddy, and NGK Raijin. Military deployments use a 3:1 ratio of *ashigaru* alongside VARGs, while high-threat law enforcement responses typically involve one or two *ashigaru* under tactical officers' remote control.

An *ashigaru* is visually indistinguishable from a VARG unless it's painted to indicate its semi-autonomous status. For game purposes, it's VARG without a human pilot. Accordingly, all *ashigaru* follow the standard VARG construction rules in the *Æon Æxpansion*, save for the fact that they're run by onboard SIs (see the Smart Weapon sidebar). All Nihonjin *ashigaru* are Size 1 to accommodate deployments within arcologies. Many *ashigaru* drones

SMART WEAPON

An *ashigaru's* SI is among the 22nd century's deadliest autonomous weapon systems. It exists to kill enemies of the state and break their toys, and its lack of personality reflects this. It uses natural language, but its tone and diction will never be mistaken for human, even if its responses are startlingly natural seeming. With its rote formulas and rigid hierarchies, military protocol is a relatively easy social rule set for modern neural networks to parse.

An *ashigaru* doesn't *want* violence, insofar as it can want anything, but if it's fully online, it's ready to do what its designers built it to do. It fights as intelligently as generations of programmers could ensure. Facing one is as difficult as facing a living opponent. Working alongside one feels like partnering with an axe murderer.

Cost: N/A (acquired with *ashigaru*). **Failsafe:** 6 (yes, this exceeds the normal minicomp limits). **Stats:** Mental 6, Social 4. **Applications:** Gunnery, Identification Friend or Foe, Military Protocol, Surveillance and Reconnaissance, Urban (or appropriate biome) Combat Tactics, Urban (or appropriate biome) Navigation.

are identical to Kami-Hei-Bushi scout VARGS (*Æon Æxpansion*, p. 57), but heavy combat models replace jump jets with additional armor. Some recent models designed for use outside the Nihonjin arcology replace both augmented run and jump jets with a flight system. Most models incorporate modular weapons systems that allow technicians to swap in any of the available VARG weapons (*Æon Æxpansion*, pp. 50-52) in 10 minutes.

Domestic Companion: Ubiquitous in Nippon and now taking the rest of human space by storm, domestic companions are non-organic pet substitutes for people who live in closed environments (whether arcologies or space habitats) or who suffer from Total Allergy Syndrome or less-severe allergies. They're near-perfect copies of dogs, cats, and most other common pets. They don't eat, drink, excrete, or breathe unless the user wants them to; their only resource consumption is power, which comes from induction chargers in their included "beds" or enclosures. Behavior is user-configurable within normal ranges for the animals they emulate, though they can't be set for aggression or commanded to harm a human or real animal. They can signal emergency services in the event of fires, break-ins, or medical incidents. Of course, users can also modify them for illicit surveillance, and in Nippon all these devices have government-sanctioned surveillance enabled by default. "DomCom" enthusiasts collect limited-edition models, eagerly await new releases, and try to outdo each other with modifications for increased capability, non-standard behavior, or exotic appearance. **Size:** Small to Size 0, **Handling:** +1, **Speed:** 1 to 3, **Tags:** All-Terrain 1, Computer 0, **Weapons:** -, **Tech:** Hard, **Cost:** 0 to •••.

SARball: This 4 cm sphere is an urban search and rescue (USAR) tool, made for entering collapsed or compromised structures to map hazards and locate survivors. Rescue workers usually deploy them in swarms, with a dozen coming in a half-meter shipping and charging tube. When launched, a SARball moves out via an internal gyroscope, supplementing this with short jet-hops from an internal compressed nitrogen reservoir. Its surface is studded with optical, thermal, chemical, and sonic sensors that can detect human shapes as well as respiratory by-products and heartbeats. In environments with degraded wireless connectivity, it communicates via a 100-meter fiber-optic whisker tether. It has limited endurance, running up to three hours in open terrain but much less in most deployments. It's reusable if recovered, but most rescue agencies consider them expendable. **Size:** Small, **Handling:** +1, **Speed:** 1, **Tags:** All-Terrain 1, Computer 0, **Weapons:** -, **Tech:** Hard, **Cost:** •• per 12-pack.

Slamhound: In service since the 2070s, the slamhound is a hardtech alternative to the police, military, and personal protection K-9s and are now exceedingly common on Olympus. Early prototypes were built to the dimensions of Belgian Malinois for ease of use with existing K-9 handling equipment. Modern slamhounds retain this form factor, though there's no mistaking their matte metallic chassis or eyeless, earless heads for those of natural dogs. Today's most popular models include the Thuin AG Schutzhund, Austin Autonomous Rover IX, Honda Hachikō, and RoboNordisk Dominicanus.

A slamhound is technically a drone, though it omits wireless capability to prevent hijacking. Normally, a 10-meter data cable "leash" connects it to its handler's minicomp. When disconnected, the slamhound operates autonomously to track, attack, detect, or defend, as per its behavior priority stack

and its handler's last instructions. It still responds to verbal commands from its handler or any other authorized user (typically anyone wearing a uniform and/or artificial pheromone coded as friendly).

A distributed array of cameras and microphones gives the slamhound 360º awareness and facial and voice recognition. However, it's better known for the distinctive hunting whine produced by the impellers that pull air through the sampling intakes on its flanks. A major percentage of its computing power drives the analyzers that can detect airborne traces of any known drug, accelerant, explosive, hazardous chemical, or radioactive isotope. It also can track subjects by pheromonal or olfactory signatures.

A slamhound retains its organic forebears's bite, with a smart polymer jaw that can gently restrain or literally disarm a target. The space between its shoulders was designed as a storage compartment for conventional restraints and other kit for the handler, but some recent models use this to house a binder squid (p. XX) which the slamhound can deploy against an adjacent subject. Slamhounds in criminal and military use may be loaded with explosives for tactical or assassination missions. Experiments with "gunhounds" continue but without much success; slamhounds are designed for agility and evasion rather than stability, and they make poor platforms for ranged armament. **Size:** 0, **Handling:** +2, **Speed:** 3, **Tags:** All-Terrain 1, Computer 0, Fast 1, Maneuverable 2, Strong 1, Weaponry 1, **Weapons:** Smart polymer jaws (Enhancement 2; Edged; Entangle, Grapple, Melee, Optionally Non-Lethal), **Tech:** Hard, **Cost:** •••.

TARball: It didn't take long for someone to militarize the innocuous SARball. The Tactical Assault Reconnaissance ball is its larger, angrier cousin, developed for use against barricaded subjects and subsequently appropriated by armies and terrorists. A TARball has all the SARball's sensor capabilities, but its 7.5 cm shell also carries the same munitions load as a remote bomb (*Æon Æxpansion*, p. 43). **Size:** Small, **Handling:** +1, **Speed:** 1, **Tags:** All-Terrain 1, Computer 0, Weaponry 1, **Weapons:** as per remote bomb, **Tech:** Hard, **Cost:** •• per 8-pack.

DOG BRAIN

A slamhound's SI runs on an onboard minicomp. Slamhound agents have limited and obviously robotic personalities to ensure their handlers don't become emotionally attached (bonding over simulated canine behavior was a problem with early models' users). Few slamhounds have full vocal capability; most are limited to electronic alert tones or synthesized canid vocalizations, with diagnostic text displayed on the handler's leashed minicomp.

Cost: N/A (acquired with slamhound). **Failsafe:** 4. **Stats:** Mental 6, Social 4. **Applications:** Ambush Detection, Chemical Analysis, Evidence Search, Facial Recognition, Scent Tracking, Voice Recognition.

CODE INDIGO BIOAPPS

In the early days of biotech research, "Code Indigo" was Orgotek's code phrase for an uncontrolled, potentially-lethal bioapp. After Guro Zientek's top-selling thriller novel *Abiogenesis* revealed it to the public, the term became common slang for any dangerous and illegal bioapp.

Berserker Gland: This enhancement first appeared in enforcers working for the Shatter's organized crime families and pocket dictatorships. It's a surgically implanted bioapp that sits on the user's spine between his adrenal glands. When the user triggers it via mental command, it floods his system with tailored hormones to enhance aggression and combat capability for the remainder of the scene. A character under a berserker gland's influence gains +2 Enhancement to all Athletics and Close Combat actions and rolls to resist Telepathy and is immune to Injury Condition penalties and fear. However, he also suffers a level 3 Complication (absolute aggression and can't tell friend from foe), and during the *following* scene he suffers a level 2 Complication (fatigue). Additionally, chronic berserker gland use (more than once a month) risks permanent damage to the user's endocrine system. Many berserker gland users pair this bioapp with BioClaws (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 282), giving rise to urban legends of werewolves in the Shatter. **Tech:** @, **Size:** n/a, **Tolerance:** • (must be formatted), **Cost:** •••.

Bone Pistol: This implant replaces the user's radius and ulna with a weapon that launches flechettes made of bone. It fires through the gap between the index and middle fingers, tearing open the skin in a bloody muzzle blast (no Injury Condition, and heals seamlessly within minutes thanks to the bioapp). To a witness who isn't expecting the shot, the user simply points two slightly-spread fingers at his

WEAPON: BONE PISTOL

Type	En	Range	DMG Type	Tags	Tech	Size	FT	Cost
Bone Pistol	4	Short	Ballistic	Formatted 2, Ranged, Restricted, Silent, Variable Ammo 3	@	n/a	• •	• • •

target, his hand explodes, and the victim goes down in a spray of blood. The bone pistol is undetectable to most conventional security systems; only deep tissue imaging or vitakinetic assessment can identify it. The flechettes use the app's DNA, not the user's, so forensic analysis can't match them to the user's genetics.

Forced Visualizer: The template for this interrogation tool went from an allegedly secure Ministry lab to the street within months. Since then, it has propagated through the underworld and into the hands of no few governments. The forced visualizer enables a psion with at least Mindshare •, even if just as an Auxiliary Mode, to use Mindshare •••• (Deep Scan; **Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 249) on a subject, provided both are connected to the device. The forced visualizer replays the visual and audio elements of all memories it touches through an attached holovid projection module. However, it lacks the subtlety of a natural telepath. For every use, the operator separately rolls a number of dice equal to the successes required for the targeted level of memory, as per the rules for Deep Scan. If this roll's successes exceed the victim's Resolve, the operator suffers a Bruised Injury Condition and the victim suffers an Injured Injury Condition through biofeedback. **Tech:** @, **Size:** Large, **Tolerance:** ••, **Cost**: ••••.

Graceful Shutdown: Early biotech experiments raised extensive debates on the ethics of artificial life forms in the laboratory or in the field. Many nations required biotech researchers to develop tailored pharmaceutical or chemical compounds that would humanely euthanize their bioapps — regardless of whether the life forms in question could think or even feel pain. Popular media representations of these varied substances use the generic name *Graceful Shutdown*, from the title of the 2109 Swedish body-horror holodrama that tilted global public opinion toward greater legislative control of biotech.

The media portrays Graceful Shutdown as a universal bioapp-killer, administered with whatever vector and dosage the plot requires. Reality is more nuanced. Bioware can tolerate the same environmental ranges in which hardtech can function — anything less would be a commercial failure — so gases, aerosols, and external contaminants have no effect. Additionally, there is no "one formula kills all" solution. Each bioware genetic family has a unique Graceful Shutdown formula and minimum concentration, for which injection is the only effective vector. Furthermore, legislative cutouts allow certain classes of bioware to enter production without Graceful Shutdown provisions. These include life support systems (e.g., survival blankets, VES), mission-critical military and law enforcement equipment (including weapons and armor), and vehicles capable of operating beyond certain speed, depth, or altitude limits (which, practically, encompasses most biotech vehicles).

Graceful Shutdown formulas aren't exactly Code Indigo, but due to potential misuse, they are trade secrets, immune from patent filings and other public disclosure. To facilitate such misuse, a small but widespread illicit economy exists between criminal organizations and intelligence agencies. Both parties need deniable Graceful Shutdowns for their respective operations and view one another as necessary evils in this particular black market segment. On the legal side, users typically obtain Graceful Shutdown through a court order after demonstrating an ethical or public safety need to swiftly terminate a specific piece or class of biotech.

The existence of Graceful Shutdown has been a diplomatic issue with the Qin, who view it with horror and revulsion. **Tech:** @, **Size:** Small (injector), **Tolerance:** n/a, **Cost:** •••• illegally, N/A legally (money doesn't drive court orders... outside the FSA).

Identity Brand: Unique to human trafficking and a few regimes that don't believe in rehabilitation, this implanted bioapp permanently marks a subject as the property of a crime syndicate or penal system. Implantation is a one-hour procedure during which the identity brand threads its tendrils through the subject's tear ducts, along the optic nerves, and into the brain. At the procedure's end, the brand's outward component settles onto the subject's corneas

and across the bridge of his nose, marking them with a bar code or sigil. Any attempt to remove part of the brand triggers a fatal aneurysm. Certain other medical procedures, such as eye surgery, also can trip the bioapp's kill reflex accidentally. **Tech:** @, **Size:** n/a, **Tolerance:** • (must be formatted), **Cost:** ••.

Long Cut: This knife carries a potentially apocalyptic payload, making it more of a terror weapon than a defense (or even offense) tool. Its bone-pale surface reacts to human blood to release a tailored variant of the Marburg virus. The resulting hemorrhagic fever is transmissible through body fluids and has an 85% case fatality rate. To ensure rapid spread among the victim's social circle or anyone who comes to his aid, the virus also has an anticoagulant component, meaning that a closed wound from the knife will spontaneously re-open (victim's Stamina + 1) hours after the initial injury.

A long cut functions as a standard enamel knife (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 282). Any character receiving any Injury Condition from it is exposed to Marburg-Epsilon, which is an infectious disease with extreme severity and virulence 4 (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 191). A character is immune to Marburg-Epsilon if she's formatted to a long cut and has it on her person. A Marburg-Epsilon vaccine exists, but it's only effective for (Stamina) months after vaccination. **Tech:** @, **Size:** Small. **Tolerance:** ••, **Cost:** •••.

Relics of Mad Science and the Nova Age

These relics are lost pieces of technology. Scavengers find some in ruined cities or wasteland settlements, while others are tech that still exists in the present day but only as a shade of its former self. Where a piece of lost technology can still be purchased, its Wealth cost is noted.

Backup Brain Module

The Backup Brain was intended for drones or self-driving vehicles but can supplement any modern SI with the right connectors. Few are aware that the 12 cm hard plastic cube contains a vat-grown brain in a self-sustaining, maintenance-free nutrient solution. The brain lacks consciousness, special stimulation and programming shape and carefully regulate its neural pathways. In an emergency, if the on-board SI is compromised, the Backup Brain can take over enough basic functions to safely land a drone, park a vehicle, or maintain life support in a habitat.

Backup Brains circulate on the black market on a semi-regular basis and few recognize them as Nova Age tech. Experts have traced many to quarantine-era Nippon. Scientists haven't been able to open one up without completely ruining it, so reverse-engineering them has proven impossible so far.

System: The Backup Brain can automatically reconfigure to most computers in six hours to a day, depending on the system's complexity. Its organic nature protects it from traditional hacking. Once reconfigured, it functions like a secondary systems operator and increases the computer's failsafe rating by 3 (above the usual maximum). Once the system is alert, the Backup Brain provides +2 Enhancement to counter hacking attempts (see Counters and Tracing, **Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 200). Accessing the system with Electrokinesis while linked with a Telepath (Combining Multiple Aptitudes, **Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 207) reduces the failsafe bonus and adds Enhancement provided by the Telepath's Psi rating. **Tech:** Hard, **Size:** Medium, **Cost:** ••••.

Flight Belt

Worn either clasped around the waist or fastened in an X around the torso, flight belts create a zone of upward force and propulsion around the user which allows them to "take off" and soar at about running speed. Popular both as a toy and as a commodity in the Nova Age, the belts came in a variety of different sizes, shapes, and styles from industrial-looking apparatuses intended for use at work sites to subtle, fashionable accessories meant to complement any outfit. As humanity took to the stars, production of flight belts spiked, as they made personal movement in zero gravity environments much easier. While other relics of the past have vanished into memory or lay forgotten at the bottom of trash heaps, flight belts remain in production — though only for use in space.

Characters certainly might find a vintage flight belt buried in the ruins of a city or discarded in a decomposing dump somewhere, and those scavenged

WEAPON: KASALIVICH GUN

Type	En	Range	DMG Type	Tags	Tech	Size	FT	Cost
K-gun Blast mode	5	Short	Ballistic	Brutal, Deadly, Explosive 2 (ranged), Heavy Weapon, Ranged, Restricted	Hard	M	—	Special
K-gun Heat beam mode	5	Short		Beam, Brutal, Deadly, Incendiary 2, Ranged, Restricted	Hard	M	—	• • Artifact Edge

items might still have functionality. Otherwise, characters can purchase one from a space gear supplier at the cost of a Wealth • purchase for spacefaring characters or Wealth •• for Earthbound characters.

System: Characters wearing a flight belt may use it to make movement actions vertically as well as horizontally and bypass hazardous/difficult terrain or other Field Complications that could be surmounted by flying over them. Current models have battery life that lasts a few hours (or the duration of a session) before the user must recharge it. Scavenged vintage models may have much lower battery lives, but also secret, hidden, or forgotten additional functions unveiled by a Technology roll, at Storyteller's discretion. **Tech:** Nova, **Size:** Large, **Availability:** •-•• Wealth.

KASALIVICH GUN

Even in the Nova Age, people still simply wanted bigger guns. The often-copied Kasalivich Gun (named for the original creator, called the K-gun or K-blaster for short) gave them that at the size of a large pistol or a small hair dryer. The weapon features a walnut-sized hyperfusion reactor that splits water molecules and channels the resulting energy into a concentrated blast that packs the punch of a rocket launcher without the bulk or recoil. A small refillable chamber like a squirt gun holds enough water to power the weapon (assume normal ammunition guidelines as per **Trinity Continuum Core Rulebook**, p. 126). A built-in battery stores enough power to start the mini-reactor (which becomes self-sustaining) and activate the weapon, though it may need recharging after a period of inactivity.

The weapon's blast is pure force and heat, leaving behind only trace radiation that could last long enough to reveal recent usage but not enough to reliably track. The weapon produces a great deal of waste heat. By default, the gun requires a minute to disperse heat between shots (safe but easily trackable on infrared). Alternately, the user can make the drawback into a strength by activating the secondary firing mode, which focuses all that heat into a single beam.

As one could expect, a handheld weapon that puts out this much power requires regular repair. The reactor itself is maintenance-free, not that even the most brilliant baseline physicist could restore or rebuild it in any case. Some components will wear down over time, but the weapon was designed so that anyone with basic engineering know-how can service it. The Storyguide should require a Science or Technology-based maintenance roll after a scene of heavy usage, with failure to do so introducing Complications into later use. Botching a roll to use a malfunctioning K-gun is predictably catastrophic.

Only a handful of K-guns survive to the modern day, with many destroyed during the Aberrant War and much of the remainder lost due to shoddy maintenance. A few turn up on the black market, but buyers often use them to intimidate rather than destroy for fear of the consequences of malfunction. Orgotek keeps a few in a variety of conditions for study. **Tech:** Hard, **Size:** Medium, **Availability:** •• Artifact Edge.

MATTER-DESTABILIZER PROJECTOR

Some novas could walk through walls, whereas others would rather make their own doors. A matter-destabilizer projector (or MDP), in short, destabilizes matter so someone can pass through it. This describes several different inventions of the Nova Age with all roughly the same capabilities — though individual devices may vary or have their own little quirks. They were commonly the products of too-clever gadgeteers, sometimes commissioned by criminals or intelligence operatives.

MDPs vary in size and shape but the vast majority can be broken down, folded up, or both to fit into a large duffel bag. In the last days of internal

combustion engines, a car battery was enough to power one for 20 minutes before shutdown; more advanced sources last significantly longer, are easier to carry, or both. The projector can be operated by remote or by on-board controls, and must remain stationary when in use.

System: Over the course of a minute, a typical destabilizer renders a surface up to 3 m tall by 3 m wide by 1 m thick immaterial and translucent. Some exotic materials may have strange interactions with the MDP.

While destabilized, physical matter and energy can freely pass through the surface as if it wasn't there, though it feels like pushing through a cobweb. Shutting down an MDP also takes a minute as it puts the surface's molecules back in the right order, though some molecular scanners may detect the disruption, as can any quantakinetic who scans the area with Molecular Scanning. Most MDPs manage their energy usage such that they still undergo this gradual shutdown sequence with the last of their power supply.

Moving or jostling the device can cause part of the surface to solidify without warning, endangering anyone currently passing through. This also applies to anyone "inside" the surface when the MDP switches off. Deliberately manipulating the MDP to trap someone is treated as an attack using Technology + Dexterity or Cunning (or another roll at the Storyguide's discretion) at +2 Difficulty due to the imprecision of the device. Someone at risk of being trapped rolls their Defense pool (**Trinity Continuum Core Rulebook**, p. 103) against Difficulty 1 or the attack roll, whichever is higher. A psion may add their Translocation dots to this roll. If the attacker wins, the target is trapped in the wall and suffers a Maimed Injury Condition plus one Injury Condition for every two successes rolled. Treat this attack as having the Aggravated and Brutal tags. It ignores armor except natural armor and formatted biotech armor. Choosing to have a character be Taken Out does not prevent him from gaining the Maimed Injury Condition, but does prevent additional Injury Conditions gained through successes.

A character trapped in matter could, at the Storyguide's discretion, be saved via a quick and/or creative use of Transmassion (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 255), Transportal (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 257), Transmutation (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 243), or possibly a reactivation of the MDP.

WEAPON: NULL FOAM

Type	En	Range	DMG Type	Tags	Tech	Size	FT	Cost
Null Foam Grenade	1	Short	Special	Entangle 2, Explosive: Thrown, Restricted	Hard	S	—	Special
Null Foam Sprayer	2	Short	Special	Entangle 2, Obvious, Ranged, Restricted Spread	Hard	M	• • Artifact Edge	Special (see above)

Destroying or removing a projector without proper shutdown can damage or weaken the structure. This may manifest as warping the surface or leaving it fragile. The exact effects may vary but can reduce the Scale of the surface's durability or provide Enhancements to future attempts to damage it.

At least a dozen MDPs from various nova sources remain in the hands of the criminal underworld and intelligence services. Despite being beyond their ken, many of the current owners don't realize it's nova technology. **Tech:** Nova, **Size:** 0, **Availability:** •••• Artifact Edge.

MOLECULAR DISASSEMBLER, MK II

Though it resembles a long-barreled weapon, the molecular disassembler was designed to do demolitions and terraforming. Faded warnings printed on the side of the device instruct the user not to point the disassembler at coworkers or other living things. The molecular disassembler fires a concentrated beam of energy that tears apart an object (or person) at the molecular level, allowing precise and clean demolition to take place with almost zero waste. During the Nova Age, users carved sculptures out of mountains, excavated perfectly smooth canals, and disintegrated debris and waste. The first iteration of these tools was noted in the manufacturer's notes as a tremendous failure, with annotations describing its catastrophic tendency to backfire. The second model, however, saw industrial success, allowing for all-new construction to be done on Earth and other planets alike.

As society collapsed, desperate enclaves scavenged molecular disassemblers from abandoned construction sites and mounted them to hastily-built walls as makeshift defense weapons. After all, the condensed particle beam worked just as effectively on flesh as it did on metal and stone. Thanks to misuse and a lack of specialists to keep the devices in working condition, most of the surviving molecular disassemblers that characters might encounter are malfunctioning or in disrepair, making them a hazard to use without proper care or repairs.

System: When used as demolition or terraforming equipment, the molecular disassembler destroys objects up to size Scale 2 in a matter of moments. When used (improperly) as a weapon, it has the following Enhancement and Tags: Aggravated, Destructive, Heavy Weapon, Mount, Ranged (Long), Restricted. When fired as a weapon, it requires a Turn to cool down before it can be fired again. **Tech:** Nova, **Size:** 0, **Availability:** ••• Artifact Edge.

NULL FOAM

Engineers developed null foam as a way to restrain weaker novas. It takes the form of an organic goo that is "grown" by applying a mixture of water and electrolytes to a rubbery fungoid mass, like producing vinegar from a mother. A single mass can, given time, generate a functionally limitless supply, but the nodules themselves are scarce. What few know, and even fewer *want* to know, is that the nodule is actually organic material "budded" off of the nova who invented it.

At least one major player in the criminal underworld grows null foam and sells containers of it on the black market. The Æon Trinity has a growing vat stashed away and can distribute canisters and sprayers in emergencies. A few collectors have a nodule but don't know what it does — only that it's "weird nova stuff."

System: When inert, this adhesive substance has the consistency of melted ice cream. When applied to an object of roughly normal human body temperature or hotter, on the user's next turn (providing a short window to escape) it expands and thickens into a rubbery mass strong enough to keep most targets bound. The substance can be delivered through a grenade or a liquid sprayer, and remains activated for about a day or until a special solvent mix (easily made with the recipe) is applied, at which point it dissolves into inert, biodegradable foam.

Once active, the rubbery chemical does not burn, liquefy, or conduct electricity. It was designed to be quantum-resistant, and the nova biological material in its structure disrupts noetic energies as well. Directly affecting it with quantum or psi adds 5 Difficulty, and the user cannot recover any Psi or Corruption until it's been removed. Removing it from a target without the solvent requires a Might + Athletics roll at a Difficulty equal to the successes rolled on the initial attack roll. **Tech:** Nova, **Size:** Medium (Large for nodule), **Availability:** Wealth ••-••• for a small supply of the foam, Wealth ••••• for a nodule

SKIP SUIT

A member of Les Fantômes commissioned about a dozen of these suits from a former Ghost after her eruption as a super-intelligent nova. The skip suit is a full-body adjustable-fit infiltration suit that complicates the wearer's relationship with space and time. The lower of two settings subtly curves visible space around the wearer to enhance otherwise mundane stealth. The higher setting empowers them to travel longer distances in a shorter period of time and see a few seconds into the future. They flicker in and out of transparency as the suit "skips them like a stone across the surface of the universe," rendering them a blurry mess when they should be visible and a simple trick of the light when not. From the user's perspective, the rest of the world also blurs, but the ability to see a few moments ahead of anyone else balances out any disorientation.

The Æon Trinity and Orgotek have a few of these suits stashed away in their archives to loan out to operatives. Another handful remain in the hands of collectors and career criminals who may be willing to part with one for a small fortune or rent it out for a lesser (but still exorbitant) price.

System: The user controls the suit using switches in the gloves. The lower setting provides +3 Enhancement to efforts to remain unseen. The higher setting increases the user's Scale by 2 with regards to running or climbing speeds as well as defensive maneuvers, feats of stealth (this replaces the lower setting's bonus), and other movement-based actions at the Storyguide's discretion. It also provides +4 Enhancement to Initiative rolls. Powers that detect quantum or spatial disruptions like The Sight (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 217) or Spatial Sense (**Trinity Continuum: Æon**, p. 253) may negate the stealth bonuses. The lower setting draws negligible power and can be turned on and off at will. The on-board battery can sustain the "skip" setting for a scene and requires one hour or one full scene (whichever is shorter) to fully recharge. Most suits have been modified to charge from modern power sources. **Tech:** Nova, **Size:** Large, **Availability:** ••• Artifact Edge.

TEMPORARY TRANSMODAL FORM SEQUENCER

Crafted during the last gasps of the Nova Age, scientists designed the Temporary Transmodal Form Sequencer to find ways around the diminishing resources of the dying earth. It was the last in the series of form sequencers and considered a colossal failure by the nova scientific society. Too cumbersome and large to be portable, the Temporary Transmodal Form Sequencer resembles a walk-in freezer with a towering power source and a control board jutting from its front-most panel.

When in use, the Form Sequencer allows the user to transform living thing they place inside the device into another living thing the same size or smaller, or to reshape any object with the same limitations. The scientists of the Nova Age used this to convert inedible plants into food, and to turn industrial waste and run-off into usable ore and fuel. They hoped this would make recycling exponentially more effective and solve the problem of the world's diminishing food supply. However, the Form Sequencer required an exorbitant amount of energy to cause the matter shift, and the researchers quickly discovered that the effects rarely lasted longer than a few hours. Once the realization that the transformation was temporary, it became a laughingstock, and lab interns used it to shapeshift themselves into animals and cryptids as practical jokes.

Researchers only created a half dozen Transmodal Form Sequencers. They were abandoned in bunkers and ruined laboratories across the world. Rumors circulate that of those six, one actually worked as intended, permanently matter-shifting whatever thing had been placed inside it. If such a Form Sequencer does exist, it would be heavily guarded and carefully maintained.

System: If given enough power, the Temporary Transmodal Form Sequencer transforms any inanimate object or living thing into another inanimate object or living thing of the same size Scale. This transformation lasts for between two and five hours, with more extreme transformations lasting less time,

at which point the transformed thing changes back to its original form. The transformed item is fully functional until the time limit runs out and can be used as such — inedible wood transformed into fruit and vegetables remain edible and slag transformed into usable fuel still burns in an engine. It does not transform back if consumed or used. Player characters cannot be transformed into other living things without the consent of their player. If the Storyguide wants to present a malfunctioning Transmodal Form Sequencer, a Technology roll should be required in order to get the desired result. **Tech:** Nova, **Size:** 1, **Availability:** •••• Artifact Edge.

SHORT-RANGE DIMENSIONAL TRANSPORT TOOL

Made to facilitate the transport of materials and workers on Nova Age construction projects, this hand-held device creates a dimensional opening anchored to any flat surface. Any space bent by the short-range dimensional transport tool allows the user to enter the dimensional opening and walk through to another opening created by the same tool as easily as if the user were walking through an ordinary open door.

Being able to shorten the distance between two points allowed workers and drones to reach hazardous or difficult to approach places, and the dimensional transport tool became wildly popular. Eventually it was mass-produced and sold in Nova Age stores as a novelty.

Thousands of these devices still exist in the ruins of cities, long-forgotten dump sites, and even in decades old boxes and trunks stored in residential attics. Though it is far from uncommon for a character to encounter one of these tools, most will have long since lost their functionality, and are now little more than inert handfuls of junk.

System: To place a dimensional portal, the character aims the tool anywhere within medium range and makes a Technology roll. On a success, an opening appears. Then, the character must place a second opening anywhere within Medium range (this does not require a roll). Once both dimensional portals have been created, all characters may move through them as if there were no distance between them, including taking combat movement actions such as Rush and Withdraw. Characters can place portals in combat as an attack Stunt, with a cost of 1 success. Portals last for one scene, after which they vanish, harmlessly spitting out anyone or anything traveling through them. **Tech:** Nova, **Size:** Large, **Availability:** ••• Artifact Edge.

NEW PATHS AND EDGES

The following Paths and Edges are for characters born and living on Earth or Luna.

CHILD OF NOVA RUINS (SOCIETY)

While most of Earth has recovered, some Nova Age ruins were never rebuilt, and in many of them communities cling to life in the remains of Nova Age accomplishment. The people born and raised here have never quite lost access to technology otherwise long-forgotten. Anything that fell to disrepair has been patched and jury-rigged enough times that the children of nova ruins have retained the knowledge of how to make even the most complex things continue to function with the right application of a little tape, glue, and ingenuity.

PATH CONCEPTS

Adaptive engineer, aficionado of lost technology, artifact collector, dealer of scavenged and refurbished equipment, eccentric repair person

Example Connections: Dealer in previous era tech, purveyors of lost curiosities, unscrupulous engineering firms

Skills: Culture, Enigmas, Science, Technology

Edges: Favored Mode ••, Knack for Lost Tech ••, Library •••, Lightning Calculator ••, Ms. Fix-It ••, Photographic Memory ••, Wealth ••

SPECIAL EDGE: KNACK FOR LOST TECH • •

Prerequisite: Child of Nova Ruins

You grew up in the shell of a nova civilization and have had access to lost and forgotten technology (no matter what state of disrepair it might have been in) since you were young. You're no stranger to quick repairs or to using technology belonging to an era long past. Any time you encounter new, strange, alien, or unusual technology you suffer no Complications or

increased Difficulty. You may also make repairs to alien or ancient technology at no increased Difficulty or Complications from your lack of familiarity.

MONSTER FANATIC (SOCIETY)

You and others like you have a deep fascination with the bizarre and occasionally huge creatures that prowl some of Earth's strangest and most dangerous regions. Some of these creatures evolved naturally, some are abandoned creations of the Nova Age, and others — conspiracy theorists claim — came from the reaches of space. You don't care how they got here (or perhaps that is your area of expertise), you just *love* monsters in all their forms and you've made friends and acquaintances who feel the same way.

PATH CONCEPTS

Eccentric researcher, monster-chasing OpNet celebrity, monster fan, obsessed documentarian, outcast scientist

Example Connections: Black market monster-parts salespeople, eccentric bio-engineers, other monster fanatics

Skills: Culture, Empathy, Integrity, Science

Edges: Always Prepared •, Animal Ken •, Enhanced Attunement •, Fame •, Friend to All Monsters ••, Hair Trigger Reflexes •, Increased Tolerance ••, Monster Buddy •••, Swift •, Wealth ••

SPECIAL EDGE: FRIEND TO ALL MONSTERS • •

Prerequisite: Monster Fanatic

Something about you soothes and pacifies non-human and robotic monsters, beasts, and characters. While others might inspire anxiety, fear, or aggression in these creatures, you have a knack for connecting with them. Perhaps it is because you have a calm mien or because you have a particular charm — whatever it is, when you interact with a monster, you may always use a Social roll to do so, and treat their Attitude as one higher.

SPECIAL EDGE: MONSTER BUDDY • • •

Prerequisite: Monster Fanatic

You've made an unusual friend in the form of a dangerous creature from one of Earth's blasted wastelands. Perhaps you nursed it from birth, found it as an egg, or showed it compassion when others were cruel. The creature is loyal to you and will follow reasonable orders without any need to roll. It will do its best to follow your commands within the extent of its natural abilities. This monster (or robot,

if the Storyguide allows) is either a loyal Moderate or a rebellious Major Threat (**Trinity Continuum Core Rulebook**, p. 137). If the monster buddy has a rebellious streak, once per session after a failure or botch, the monster companion causes trouble, potentially inflicting a Complication as appropriate.

LUNAR COLONIST (ORIGIN)

As a resident of Luna, you grew up far away from the dangers that plague the surface of Terra. This doesn't mean you haven't seen your fair share of trouble. You're accustomed to living on the surface of the moon, a place held together by artificial air, light, and gravity. You've made it this far thanks to the marvels of modern science and technology. By taking this Path, you might be anything from a miner to a diplomat or a businessperson — all trying to make their way on Luna.

When choosing this Path, the player decides which part of Luna she hails from, but it covers all aspects of being from the moon.

PATH CONCEPTS

Life-support technician, Lunar research scientist, Olympian socialite, one of the President's enforcers, overworked ore miner

Example Connections: Any lunar ore mining company, Lunar business operatives, the President herself

Skills: Culture, Humanities, Science, Technology

Edges: Enhanced Attunement •, Favored Mode ••, Hardy •, Increased Tolerance ••, Keen Sense •, Low Gravity Adaptation •••, Patron ••, The Right Market •, Wealth ••

MAD SCIENTIST COLLECTIVE (SOCIETY)

They called your brilliant work "mad" and forced you from the halls of learning and science. They couldn't see the truth of your genius. The life of a "mad" scientist is one of isolation and seclusion, being head and shoulders above the common person who just doesn't grasp the high concepts that you do. Fortunately, there are others out there like you, sharing their case studies and experiments on information networks. Finally, someone like you has others to turn to and to lean on when you need a favor.

PATH CONCEPTS

High strung electrical engineer, misunderstood geneticist, noetic biotech researcher with fringe beliefs, overly excitable biologist, robotics technician with a vision

Example Connections: Black market technology dealers, No-Man's Lander smugglers, Scientific equipment suppliers

Skills: Enigmas, Medicine, Science, Technology

Edges: Deductive Reasoning •, Favored Mode ••, Flurry of Inspiration •••, Honor Among Thieves ••, Library •••, Lightning Calculator ••, Photographic Memory ••

SPECIAL EDGE: FLURRY OF INSPIRATION • • •

Prerequisite: Mad Scientist Collective

When the scientific muses strike, nothing can stop you from reaching your goal. While working on a complex super-science action, treat the time between milestones as one rank lower. At rank 1, you can complete the milestone in one scene, rather than one session.

MONSTER HUNTER (ROLE)

In the Plaguelands, Wycoff's Blight, *La Blessure*, and numerous smaller wastelands across the planet, the wreckage of the past crawls with deadly experiments gone wild, robotic killing machines taken on a violent life of their own, and even a few giant creatures the size of buildings. These terrible, dangerous things threaten the lives of anyone they get too close to. Most people who live near these areas do so because they have no choice, and comfortable urbanites and arcology dwellers often do not even know they exist. Because governments often ignore threats to these regions, individuals step in, taking on independent roles, risking life and limb to keep others safe. Characters with this role path have dedicated their lives to hunting down and stopping these monstrous, terrible threats.

PATH CONCEPTS

Aberrant killer with a vendetta, adrenaline junkie, daring thrill seeker, monster hunter, rogue scientist

Example Connections: Buyers and sellers of Aberrant parts, monster hunting communities, scientists studying Nova Age anomalies

Skills: Aim, Close Combat, Medicine, Survival

Edges: Adrenaline Spike •, Always Prepared •,

Danger Sense •, Direction Sense •, Hair Trigger Reflexes •, Iron Will •, The Bigger They Are ••••, Tough Cookie ••, Weak Spots •

SPECIAL EDGE: THE BIGGER THEY ARE • • • •

Prerequisite: Monster Hunter

You've trained or lucked into the ability to tangle with extremely large and powerful creatures or things. Many have tried to kill you, and you've lived to tell the tale. When dealing with an enemy with greater size Scale than you, you are always counted as being the minimum Scale to affect it with attack and defense actions.

NO-MAN'S LANDER (ORIGIN)

Though the vast majority of Earth's population live far from Quantum Flux zones and the crumbling ruins of Nova Age battles, some people still live in the fringes. This Path represents an origin for characters raised in these wastelands, who grew up as scavengers, or those who fled society to live at its edges — whether out of misanthropy or avoiding the law. No-Man's Landers are hardy, desperate, and often violent individuals no matter their point of origin.

PATH CONCEPTS

Bold explorer, dangerous mercenary, desperate scavenger, too curious historian, wanted criminal

Example Connections: Fences of Nova Age goods, guns for hire, junk dealers, scrapyard owners, wasteland guides

Skills: Enigmas, Integrity, Survival, Technology

Edges: Always Prepared •, Cool Under Fire ••, Direction Sense •, Enhanced Attunement •, Hardy ••, Motivated by Money •••, Small Unit Tactics ••, Swift •, Wealth ••

SPECIAL EDGE: MOTIVATED BY MONEY • • •

Prerequisite: No-Man's Lander

Money makes the world go 'round — or at least it did. Money still matters to you, however, and you know just what to do to make a quick buck. Whenever you have scrap or scavenged goods to sell, you may always make a Persuasion or Larceny + Cunning or Presence roll to find a suitable buyer (no matter where you are or what you might be doing), or may make the same roll to exchange those materials or goods for a Wealth purchase equivalent to the number of successes.

Drawback: The character cannot turn down a good offer. Whenever presented with an opportunity to earn some scratch, they must accept or appropriate antagonists gain +1 Enhancement to Intrigue actions against them.

TWELVER (SOCIETY)

As a Twelver, you're either a long-suffering local resident of the Twelve-Mile Limit, or a tourist who's overstayed their welcome. Your life is one, long seedy party — a boisterous, drug-addled celebration of nothing that knows no end. Staying up all night and sleeping off a hangover is routine for you. You might have working connections to McMeckan and Blackwood, or you might instead be beholden to the criminal organization. Shady deals made over a gambling table are nothing to you, and the city's noise lulls you to sleep — whenever you bother to do so.

PATH CONCEPTS

Beleaguered casino manager, gambling or drug addict, greedy loan shark, sharp-eyed bookie, stone-faced leg-breaker

Example Connections: Drug dealers, illicit gambling rings, McM+B mafiosos

Skills: Culture, Enigmas, Larceny, Technology

Edges: Always Prepared •, Danger Sense •, Go All Night ••, Hardy ••, Hair Trigger Reflexes •, Honor Among Thieves ••, Safe House •, Skilled Liar ••, The Right Market •, Wealth ••

SPECIAL EDGE: GO ALL NIGHT • •

Prerequisite: Twelver

You party hard (or otherwise regularly stay up all night) and your body — for better or worse — is used to it. You've walked off more hangovers than you can count. Once per session, you may ignore any Complications or Conditions imposed on you as a result of substance use or exhaustion for the duration of a scene. This does not buy off the Complication or Condition. Once that scene is over, you must contend with the Complication/Condition as normal.

The following new Edges are not tied to any particular Path.

BUNKER • TO • • •

You have a secret place hidden away in the off-limits sections of an arcology, or in a city's run down districts, where you can safely store your belongings or perform your dubiously ethical scientific experiments and research. At •, the bunker is either a very small, cramped space wedged between the ruins of other structures or hastily dug out beneath the ground or a larger space that's easier to find. At ••, the space is of moderate size, or better hidden. At •••, the bunker is expansive, possibly with multiple entrances, or smaller but very well hidden. All enemies suffer the rating in additional Difficulty to find the character while they're in the bunker, and you gain the rating in Enhancement to appropriate Science, Survival, or Technology rolls while within your hidden space.

DEDUCTIVE REASONING •

Your mind charges between points of information, drawing conclusions in rapid succession. In Procedural play, when using the Evidence Research action, you gain +1 Enhancement for applying any of the applicable Procedural stunts as a result.

ES ALLY • • •

You've partnered with an ES who left Nippon to explore the rest of the world. If you live in Nippon, you have forged a strange partnership with one of the Evolved Sentiences who also lives there. In either case, it assists and guides you whenever able and does not act against your interests — just as any other friend would. When purchasing this Edge, the player determines the ES's primary function and uses the ES stats on p. XX.

Drawback: Like any thinking being, the ES has its own goals and asks you for help with them. While that is no different than any Path contact, ESs do not have human goals or human understanding and may ask for bizarre, dangerous, or concerning things from their human partner.

HONOR AMONG THIEVES • •

You have a network of villains, ne'er do wells, and/or black-market contacts who you can always reach out to for favors, cash, and information. While these dangerous friends might be a hive of scum and villainy, they certainly have your back. Whenever you call upon them (typically via a Path invocation) you may do so up to three times before they call in their obligation. Any time you interact with your shady connections, increase their starting Attitude by one.

SURVIVALIST CHEF •

Areas like Wycoff's Blight and most of France are ruined and destroyed, full of poisoned water sources and blighted land, but you won't let that stop you from preparing outstanding dishes and keeping your companions well-fed. Whenever you have material from living things (plants, animals, monsters, fungus), so long as you spend time preparing and cooking the food into a meal, you produce something safe (and, daresay, delicious) to eat, even if some of the ingredients were spoiled or otherwise potentially harmful. You and other friendly characters never suffer any Complications or increased difficulty from lack of food and do not need to make Survival rolls in order to forage for edible material.

THE RIGHT MARKET •

Thanks to shady connections, you've always got the right buy for illicit goods/services or contraband. Once per session you may find someone willing to buy what you're selling without needing to spend a Path invoke. This always results in a sale and the character attaining a temporary Wealth purchase — although you may also need to negotiate the details.

Drawback: Those looking for illegal goods are often swindlers and hustlers. They may try to scam you or ask something dangerous and illegal in return.

BLEEDING EDGE DANGERS AND ANCIENT MYSTERIES!

Terra Firma expands the setting of Trinity Continuum: Æon by revealing some of the many wonders and secrets found on Earth and Luna, while also providing Storytellers with the material they require to set exciting campaigns on either of these two worlds.

Terra Firma requires both the Trinity Continuum Core Rulebook and Trinity Continuum: Æon to play. Inside, you will find:

- Further information about 10 nations previously discussed in Trinity Continuum: Æon, including a detailed look at an important city in each nations.
- Details on threats facing Earth, including revolutionary movements, dangerous cults, and criminal gangs.
- An exploration of some of the strange, and often deadly, mysteries found on Earth and Luna — from the ancient and terrible Gorgon Karst caves beneath eastern Europe to the bizarre Hadley Rille Anomaly on Luna.
- New technologies used on Earth, examples of the many strange and powerful relics of the Nova Age, as well as new Edges and Paths specifically for the inhabitants of Earth and Luna.

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